

POLICY STATEMENT Organizational Principles to Guide and Define the Child Health Care System and/or Improve the Health of all Children

American Academy  
of Pediatrics



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# Ensuring Comprehensive Care and Support for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children and Adolescents

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As a traditionally underserved population that faces numerous health disparities, youth who identify as transgender and gender diverse (TGD) and their families are increasingly presenting to pediatric providers for education, care, and referrals. The need for more formal training, standardized treatment, and research on safety and medical outcomes often leaves providers feeling ill equipped to support and care for patients that identify as TGD and families. In this policy statement, we review relevant concepts and challenges and provide suggestions for pediatric providers that are focused on promoting the health and positive development of youth that identify as TGD while eliminating discrimination and stigma.

## abstract



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## INTRODUCTION

In its dedication to the health of all children, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strives to improve health care access and eliminate disparities for children and teenagers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) of their sexual or gender identity.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite some advances in public awareness and legal protections, youth who identify as LGBTQ continue to face disparities that stem from multiple sources, including inequitable laws and policies, societal discrimination, and a lack of access to quality health care, including mental health care. Such challenges are often more intense for youth who do not conform to social expectations and norms regarding gender. Pediatric providers are increasingly encountering such youth and their families, who seek medical advice and interventions, yet they may lack the formal training to care for youth that identify as transgender and gender diverse (TGD) and their families.<sup>3</sup>

This policy statement is focused specifically on children and youth that identify as TGD rather than the larger LGBTQ population, providing brief, relevant background on the basis of current available research

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**TABLE 1** Relevant Terms and Definitions Related to Gender Care

| Term                               | Definition  |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Sex                                | An assignment that is made at birth, usually male or female, typically on the basis of external genital anatomy but sometimes on the basis of internal gonads, chromosomes, or hormone levels   |
| Gender identity                    | A person's deep internal sense of being female, male, a combination of both, somewhere in between, or neither; resulting from a multifaceted interaction of biological traits, environmental factors, self-understanding, and cultural expectations   |
| Gender expression                  | The external way a person expresses their gender; such as with clothing, hair, mannerisms, activities, or social roles  |
| Gender perception                  | The way others interpret a person's gender expression   |
| Gender diverse                     | A term that is used to describe people with gender behaviors, appearances, or identities that are incongruent with those culturally assigned to their birth sex; gender-diverse individuals may refer to themselves with many different terms, such as transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, <sup>7</sup> gender fluid, gender creative, gender independent, or noncisgender. "Gender diverse" is used to acknowledge and include the vast diversity of gender identities that exists. It replaces the former term, "gender nonconforming," which has a negative and exclusionary connotation. |
| Transgender                        | A subset of gender-diverse youth whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex and generally remains persistent, consistent, and insistent over time; the term "transgender" also encompasses many other labels individuals may use to refer to themselves.   |
| Cisgender                          | A term that is used to describe a person who identifies and expresses a gender that is consistent with the culturally defined norms of the sex they were assigned at birth  |
| Agender                            | A term that is used to describe a person who does not identify as having a particular gender  |
| Affirmed gender                    | When a person's true gender identity, or concern about their gender identity, is communicated to and validated from others as authentic   |
| MTF; affirmed female; trans female | Terms that are used to describe individuals who were assigned male sex at birth but who have a gender identity and/or expression that is asserted to be more feminine   |
| FTM; affirmed male; trans male     | Terms that are used to describe individuals who were assigned female sex at birth but who have a gender identity and/or expression that is asserted to be more masculine  |
| Gender dysphoria                   | A clinical symptom that is characterized by a sense of alienation to some or all of the physical characteristics or social roles of one's assigned gender; also, gender dysphoria is the psychiatric diagnosis in the <i>DSM-5</i> , which has focus on the distress that stems from the incongruence between one's expressed or experienced (affirmed) gender and the gender assigned at birth.  |
| Gender identity disorder           | A psychiatric diagnosis defined previously in the <i>DSM-IV</i> (changed to "gender dysphoria" in the <i>DSM-5</i> ); the primary criteria include a strong, persistent cross-sex identification and significant distress and social impairment. This diagnosis is no longer appropriate for use and may lead to stigma, but the term may be found in older research.   |
| Sexual orientation                 | A person's sexual identity in relation to the gender(s) to which they are attracted; sexual orientation and gender identity develop separately.   |

This list is not intended to be all inclusive. The pronouns "they" and "their" are used intentionally to be inclusive rather than the binary pronouns "he" and "she" and "his" and "her." Adapted from Bonifacio HJ, Rosenthal SM. Gender variance and dysphoria in children and adolescents. *Pediatr Clin North Am.* 2015;62(4):1001–1018. Adapted from Vance SR Jr, Ehrensaft D, Rosenthal SM. Psychological and medical care of gender nonconforming youth. *Pediatrics.* 2014;134(6):1184–1192. *DSM-5, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition; DSM-IV, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, FTM, female to male, MTF, male to female.

and expert opinion from clinical and research leaders, which will serve as the basis for recommendations. It is not a comprehensive review of clinical approaches and nuances to pediatric care for children and youth that identify as TGD. Professional understanding of youth that identify as TGD is a rapidly evolving clinical field in which research on appropriate clinical management is limited by insufficient funding.<sup>3,4</sup>

## DEFINITIONS

To clarify recommendations and discussions in this policy statement, some definitions are provided. However, brief descriptions of human behavior or identities may not capture nuance in this evolving field.

"Sex," or "natal gender," is a label, generally "male" or "female," that is typically assigned at birth on the basis of genetic and anatomic characteristics, such as genital anatomy, chromosomes, and sex hormone levels. Meanwhile, "gender identity" is one's internal sense of who one is, which results from a multifaceted interaction of biological traits, developmental influences, and environmental conditions. It may be male, female, somewhere in between, a combination of both, or neither (ie, not conforming to a binary conceptualization of gender). Self-recognition of gender identity develops over time, much the same way as a child's physical body does. For some people, gender identity can be fluid, shifting in different contexts. "Gender expression"

refers to the wide array of ways people display their gender through clothing, hair styles, mannerisms, or social roles. Exploring different ways of expressing gender is common for children and may challenge social expectations. The way others interpret this expression is referred to as "gender perception" (Table 1).<sup>5,6</sup>

These labels may or may not be congruent. The term "cisgender" is used if someone identifies and expresses a gender that is consistent with the culturally defined norms of the sex that was assigned at birth. "Gender diverse" is an umbrella term to describe an ever-evolving array of labels that people may apply when their gender identity, expression, or even perception does not conform

to the norms and stereotypes others expect of their assigned sex. “Transgender” is usually reserved for a subset of such youth whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex and generally remains persistent, consistent, and insistent over time. These terms are not diagnoses; rather, they are personal and often dynamic ways of describing one’s own gender experience.

Gender identity is not synonymous with “sexual orientation,” which refers to a person’s identity in relation to the gender(s) to which they are sexually and romantically attracted. Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct but interrelated constructs.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, being transgender does not imply a sexual orientation, and people who identify as transgender still identify as straight, gay, bisexual, etc, on the basis of their attractions. (For more information, *The Gender Book*, found at [www.thegenderbook.com](http://www.thegenderbook.com), is a resource with illustrations that are used to highlight these core terms and concepts.)

## EPIDEMIOLOGY

In population-based surveys, questions related to gender identity are rarely asked, which makes it difficult to assess the size and characteristics of the population that is TGD. In the 2014 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 19 states elected to include optional questions on gender identity. Extrapolation from these data suggests that the US prevalence of adults who identify as transgender or “gender nonconforming” is 0.6% (1.4 million), ranging from 0.3% in North Dakota to 0.8% in Hawaii.<sup>9</sup> On the basis of these data, it has been estimated that 0.7% of youth ages 13 to 17 years (~150 000) identify as transgender.<sup>10</sup> This number is much higher than previous estimates, which were

extrapolated from individual states or specialty clinics, and is likely an underestimate given the stigma regarding those who openly identify as transgender and the difficulty in defining “transgender” in a way that is inclusive of all gender-diverse identities.<sup>11</sup>

There have been no large-scale prevalence studies among children and adolescents, and there is no evidence that adult statistics reflect young children or adolescents. In the 2014 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, those 18 to 24 years of age were more likely than older age groups to identify as transgender (0.7%).<sup>9</sup> Children report being aware of gender incongruence at young ages. Children who later identify as TGD report first having recognized their gender as “different” at an average age of 8.5 years; however, they did not disclose such feelings until an average of 10 years later.<sup>12</sup>

## MENTAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Adolescents and adults who identify as transgender have high rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide.<sup>13–20</sup> Evidence suggests that an identity of TGD has an increased prevalence among individuals with autism spectrum disorder, but this association is not yet well understood.<sup>21,22</sup> In 1 retrospective cohort study of 180 trans youth and matched cisgender peers, 56 youth who identified as transgender reported previous suicidal ideation, and 31 reported a previous suicide attempt, compared with 20 and 11 among matched youth who identified as cisgender, respectively.<sup>13</sup> Some youth who identify as TGD also experience gender dysphoria, which is a specific diagnosis given to those who experience impairment in peer and/or family relationships, school performance, or other aspects of their life as a consequence of the

incongruence between their assigned sex and their gender identity.<sup>23</sup>

There is no evidence that risk for mental illness is inherently attributable to one’s identity of TGD. Rather, it is believed to be multifactorial, stemming from an internal conflict between one’s appearance and identity, limited availability of mental health services, low access to health care providers with expertise in caring for youth who identify as TGD, discrimination, stigma, and social rejection.<sup>24</sup> This was affirmed by the American Psychological Association in 2008<sup>25</sup> (with practice guidelines released in 2015<sup>6</sup>) and the American Psychiatric Association, which made the following statement in 2012:

*Being transgender or gender variant implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social or vocational capabilities; however, these individuals often experience discrimination due to a lack of civil rights protections for their gender identity or expression.... [Such] discrimination and lack of equal civil rights is damaging to the mental health of transgender and gender variant individuals.<sup>26</sup>*

Youth who identify as TGD often confront stigma and discrimination, which contribute to feelings of rejection and isolation that can adversely affect physical and emotional well-being. For example, many youth believe that they must hide their gender identity and expression to avoid bullying, harassment, or victimization. Youth who identify as TGD experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness, physical violence (at home and in the community), substance abuse, and high-risk sexual behaviors.<sup>5,6,12,27–31</sup> Among the 3 million HIV testing events that were reported in 2015, the highest percentages of new infections were among women who identified as transgender<sup>32</sup> and were also at particular risk for not knowing their HIV status.<sup>30</sup>



## GENDER-AFFIRMATIVE CARE

In a gender-affirmative care model (GACM), pediatric providers offer developmentally appropriate care that is oriented toward understanding and appreciating the youth's gender experience. A strong, nonjudgmental partnership with youth and their families can facilitate exploration of complicated emotions and gender-diverse expressions while allowing questions and concerns to be raised in a supportive environment.<sup>5</sup> In a GACM, the following messages are conveyed:

- transgender identities and diverse gender expressions do not constitute a mental disorder;
- variations in gender identity and expression are normal aspects of human diversity, and binary definitions of gender do not always reflect emerging gender identities;
- gender identity evolves as an interplay of biology, development, socialization, and culture; and
- if a mental health issue exists, it most often stems from stigma and negative experiences rather than being intrinsic to the child.<sup>27,33</sup>

The GACM is best facilitated through the integration of medical, mental health, and social services, including specific resources and supports for parents and families.<sup>24</sup> Providers work together to destigmatize gender variance, promote the child's self-worth, facilitate access to care, educate families, and advocate for safer community spaces where children are free to develop and explore their gender.<sup>5</sup> A specialized gender-affirmative therapist, when available, may be an asset in helping children and their families build skills for dealing with gender-based stigma, address symptoms of anxiety or depression, and reinforce the child's overall resiliency.<sup>34,35</sup> There is a limited but growing body

of evidence that suggests that using an integrated affirmative model results in young people having fewer mental health concerns whether they ultimately identify as transgender.<sup>24,36,37</sup>

In contrast, "conversion" or "reparative" treatment models are used to prevent children and adolescents from identifying as transgender or to dissuade them from exhibiting gender-diverse expressions. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has concluded that any therapeutic intervention with the goal of changing a youth's gender expression or identity is inappropriate.<sup>33</sup> Reparative approaches have been proven to be not only unsuccessful<sup>38</sup> but also deleterious and are considered outside the mainstream of traditional medical practice.<sup>29,39–42</sup> The AAP described reparative approaches as "unfair and deceptive."<sup>43</sup> At the time of this writing,\* conversion therapy was banned by executive regulation in New York and by legislative statutes in 9 other states as well as the District of Columbia.<sup>44</sup>

Pediatric providers have an essential role in assessing gender concerns and providing evidence-based information to assist youth and families in medical decision-making. Not doing so can prolong or exacerbate gender dysphoria and contribute to abuse and stigmatization.<sup>35</sup> If a pediatric provider does not feel prepared to address gender concerns when they occur, then referral to a pediatric or mental health provider with more expertise is appropriate. There is little research on communication and efficacy with transfers in care for youth who identify as TGD,

particularly from pediatric to adult providers.

## DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Acknowledging that the capacity for emerging abstract thinking in childhood is important to conceptualize and reflect on identity, gender-affirmation guidelines are being focused on individually tailored interventions on the basis of the physical and cognitive development of youth who identify as TGD.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, research substantiates that children who are prepubertal and assert an identity of TGD know their gender as clearly and as consistently as their developmentally equivalent peers who identify as cisgender and benefit from the same level of social acceptance.<sup>46</sup> This developmental approach to gender affirmation is in contrast to the outdated approach in which a child's gender-diverse assertions are held as "possibly true" until an arbitrary age (often after pubertal onset) when they can be considered valid, an approach that authors of the literature have termed "watchful waiting." This outdated approach does not serve the child because critical support is withheld. Watchful waiting is based on binary notions of gender in which gender diversity and fluidity is pathologized; in watchful waiting, it is also assumed that notions of gender identity become fixed at a certain age. The approach is also influenced by a group of early studies with validity concerns, methodologic flaws, and limited follow-up on children who identified as TGD and, by adolescence, did not seek further treatment ("desisters").<sup>45,47</sup> More robust and current research suggests that, rather than focusing on who a child will become, valuing them for who they are, even at a young age, fosters secure attachment and resilience, not only for the child but also for the whole family.<sup>5,45,48,49</sup>

\* For more information regarding state-specific laws, please contact the AAP Division of State Government Affairs at [stgov@aap.org](mailto:stgov@aap.org).



## MEDICAL MANAGEMENT

Pediatric primary care providers are in a unique position to routinely inquire about gender development in children and adolescents as part of recommended well-child visits<sup>50</sup> and to be a reliable source of validation, support, and reassurance. They are often the first provider to be aware that a child may not identify as cisgender or that there may be distress related to a gender-diverse identity. The best way to approach gender with patients is to inquire directly and nonjudgmentally about their experience and feelings before applying any labels.<sup>27,51</sup>

Many medical interventions can be offered to youth who identify as TGD and their families. The decision of whether and when to initiate gender-affirmative treatment is personal and involves careful consideration of risks, benefits, and other factors unique to each patient and family. Many protocols suggest that clinical assessment of youth who identify as TGD is ideally conducted on an ongoing basis in the setting of a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach, which, in addition to the patient and family, may include the pediatric provider, a mental health provider (preferably with expertise in caring for youth who identify as TGD ), social and legal supports, and a pediatric endocrinologist or adolescent-medicine gender specialist, if available.<sup>6,28</sup> There is no prescribed path, sequence, or end point. Providers can make every effort to be aware of the influence of their own biases. The medical options also vary depending on pubertal and developmental progression.

### Clinical Setting

In the past year, 1 in 4 adults who identified as transgender avoided a necessary doctor's visit because of fear of being mistreated.<sup>31</sup> All clinical office staff have a role in affirming a patient's gender identity. Making flyers available or displaying posters

related to LGBTQ health issues, including information for children who identify as TGD and families, reveals inclusivity and awareness. Generally, patients who identify as TGD feel most comfortable when they have access to a gender-neutral restroom. Diversity training that encompasses sensitivity when caring for youth who identify as TGD and their families can be helpful in educating clinical and administrative staff. A patient-asserted name and pronouns are used by staff and are ideally reflected in the electronic medical record without creating duplicate charts.<sup>52,53</sup> The US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology require all electronic health record systems certified under the Meaningful Use incentive program to have the capacity to confidentially collect information on gender identity.<sup>54,55</sup> Explaining and maintaining confidentiality procedures promotes openness and trust, particularly with youth who identify as LGBTQ.<sup>1</sup> Maintaining a safe clinical space can provide at least 1 consistent, protective refuge for patients and families, allowing authentic gender expression and exploration that builds resiliency.

### Pubertal Suppression

Gonadotrophin-releasing hormones have been used to delay puberty since the 1980s for central precocious puberty.<sup>56</sup> These reversible treatments can also be used in adolescents who experience gender dysphoria to prevent development of secondary sex characteristics and provide time up until 16 years of age for the individual and the family to explore gender identity, access psychosocial supports, develop coping skills, and further define appropriate treatment goals. If pubertal suppression treatment is

suspended, then endogenous puberty will resume.<sup>20,57,58</sup>

Often, pubertal suppression creates an opportunity to reduce distress that may occur with the development of secondary sexual characteristics and allow for gender-affirming care, including mental health support for the adolescent and the family. It reduces the need for later surgery because physical changes that are otherwise irreversible (protrusion of the Adam's apple, male pattern baldness, voice change, breast growth, etc) are prevented. The available data reveal that pubertal suppression in children who identify as TGD generally leads to improved psychological functioning in adolescence and young adulthood.<sup>20,57–59</sup>

Pubertal suppression is not without risks. Delaying puberty beyond one's peers can also be stressful and can lead to lower self-esteem and increased risk taking.<sup>60</sup> Some experts believe that genital underdevelopment may limit some potential reconstructive options.<sup>61</sup> Research on long-term risks, particularly in terms of bone metabolism<sup>62</sup> and fertility,<sup>63</sup> is currently limited and provides varied results.<sup>57,64,65</sup> Families often look to pediatric providers for help in considering whether pubertal suppression is indicated in the context of their child's overall well-being as gender diverse.

### Gender Affirmation

As youth who identify as TGD reflect on and evaluate their gender identity, various interventions may be considered to better align their gender expression with their underlying identity. This process of reflection, acceptance, and, for some, intervention is known as "gender affirmation." It was formerly referred to as "transitioning," but many view the process as an affirmation and acceptance of who they have always been rather than a transition

**TABLE 2** The Process of Gender Affirmation May Include  $\geq 1$  of the Following Components

| Component                  | Definition  | General Age Range <sup>a</sup>                                     | Reversibility <sup>a</sup>   |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Social affirmation         | Adopting gender-affirming hairstyles, clothing, name, gender pronouns, and restrooms and other facilities   | Any  | Reversible   |
| Puberty blockers           | Gonadotropin-releasing hormone analogues, such as leuprolide and histrelin  | During puberty (Tanner stage 2–5) <sup>b</sup>                     | Reversible <sup>c</sup>  |
| Cross-sex hormone therapy  | Testosterone (for those who were assigned female at birth and are masculinizing); estrogen plus androgen inhibitor (for those who were assigned male at birth and are feminizing) | Early adolescence onward   | Partially reversible (skin texture, muscle mass, and fat deposition); irreversible once developed (testosterone: Adam's apple protrusion, voice changes, and male pattern baldness; estrogen: breast development); unknown reversibility (effect on fertility) |
| Gender-affirming surgeries | “Top” surgery (to create a male-typical chest shape or enhance breasts); “bottom” surgery (surgery on genitals or reproductive organs); facial feminization and other procedures  | Typically adults (adolescents on case-by-case basis <sup>d</sup> ) | Not reversible   |
| Legal affirmation          | Changing gender and name recorded on birth certificate, school records, and other documents   | Any  | Reversible   |

<sup>a</sup> Note that the provided age range and reversibility is based on the little data that are currently available.

<sup>b</sup> There is limited benefit to starting gonadotropin-releasing hormone after Tanner stage 5 for pubertal suppression. However, when cross-sex hormones are initiated with a gradually increasing schedule, the initial levels are often not high enough to suppress endogenous sex hormone secretion. Therefore, gonadotropin-releasing hormone may be continued in accordance with the Endocrine Society Guidelines.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>c</sup> The effect of sustained puberty suppression on fertility is unknown. Pubertal suppression can be, and often is indicated to be, followed by cross-sex hormone treatment. However, when cross-sex hormones are initiated without endogenous hormones, then fertility may be decreased.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>d</sup> Eligibility criteria for gender-affirmative surgical interventions among adolescents are not clearly defined between established protocols and practice. When applicable, eligibility is usually determined on a case-by-case basis with the adolescent and the family along with input from medical, mental health, and surgical providers.<sup>68–71</sup>

from 1 gender identity to another. Accordingly, some people who have gone through the process prefer to call themselves “affirmed females, males, etc” (or just “females, males, etc”), rather than using the prefix “trans-.” Gender affirmation is also used to acknowledge that some individuals who identify as TGD may feel affirmed in their gender without pursuing medical or surgical interventions.<sup>7,66</sup>

Supportive involvement of parents and family is associated with better mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>67</sup> Gender affirmation among adolescents with gender dysphoria often reduces the emphasis on gender in their lives, allowing them to attend to other developmental tasks, such as academic success, relationship building, and future-oriented planning.<sup>64</sup> Most protocols for gender-affirming interventions incorporate World Professional Association of Transgender

Health<sup>35</sup> and Endocrine Society<sup>68</sup> recommendations and include  $\geq 1$  of the following elements (Table 2):

1. **Social Affirmation:** This is a reversible intervention in which children and adolescents express partially or completely in their asserted gender identity by adapting hairstyle, clothing, pronouns, name, etc. Children who identify as transgender and socially affirm and are supported in their asserted gender show no increase in depression and only minimal (clinically insignificant) increases in anxiety compared with age-matched averages.<sup>48</sup> Social affirmation can be complicated given the wide range of social interactions children have (eg, extended families, peers, school, community, etc). There is little guidance on the best approach (eg, all at once, gradual, creating new social networks, or affirming within existing networks, etc). Pediatric providers

can best support families by anticipating and discussing such complexity proactively, either in their own practice or through enlisting a qualified mental health provider.

2. **Legal Affirmation:** Elements of a social affirmation, such as a name and gender marker, become official on legal documents, such as birth certificates, passports, identification cards, school documents, etc. The processes for making these changes depend on state laws and may require specific documentation from pediatric providers.
3. **Medical Affirmation:** This is the process of using cross-sex hormones to allow adolescents who have initiated puberty to develop secondary sex characteristics of the opposite biological sex. Some changes are partially reversible if hormones are stopped, but others become

irreversible once they are fully developed (Table 2).

4. **Surgical Affirmation:** Surgical approaches may be used to feminize or masculinize features, such as hair distribution, chest, or genitalia, and may include removal of internal organs, such as ovaries or the uterus (affecting fertility). These changes are irreversible. Although current protocols typically reserve surgical interventions for adults,<sup>35,68</sup> they are occasionally pursued during adolescence on a case-by-case basis, considering the necessity and benefit to the adolescent's overall health and often including multidisciplinary input from medical, mental health, and surgical providers as well as from the adolescent and family.<sup>69–71</sup>

For some youth who identify as TGD whose natal gender is female, menstruation, breakthrough bleeding, and dysmenorrhea can lead to significant distress before or during gender affirmation. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology suggests that, although limited data are available to outline management, menstruation can be managed without exogenous estrogens by using a progesterone-only pill, a medroxyprogesterone acetate shot, or a progesterone-containing intrauterine or implantable device.<sup>72</sup> If estrogen can be tolerated, oral contraceptives that contain both progesterone and estrogen are more effective at suppressing menses.<sup>73</sup> The Endocrine Society guidelines also suggest that gonadotrophin-releasing hormones can be used for menstrual suppression before the anticipated initiation of testosterone or in combination with testosterone for breakthrough bleeding (enables phenotypic masculinization at a lower dose than if testosterone is used alone).<sup>68</sup> Masculinizing hormones in natal female patients may lead to a cessation of menses,

but unplanned pregnancies have been reported, which emphasizes the need for ongoing contraceptive counseling with youth who identify as TGD.<sup>72</sup>

### HEALTH DISPARITIES

In addition to societal challenges, youth who identify as TGD face several barriers within the health care system, especially regarding access to care. In 2015, a focus group of youth who identified as transgender in Seattle, Washington, revealed 4 problematic areas related to health care:

1. safety issues, including the lack of safe clinical environments and fear of discrimination by providers;
2. poor access to physical health services, including testing for sexually transmitted infections;
3. inadequate resources to address mental health concerns; and
4. lack of continuity with providers.<sup>74</sup>

This study reveals the obstacles many youth who identify as TGD face in accessing essential services, including the limited supply of appropriately trained medical and psychological providers, fertility options, and insurance coverage denials for gender-related treatments.<sup>74</sup>

Insurance denials for services related to the care of patients who identify as TGD are a significant barrier. Although the Office for Civil Rights of the US Department of Health and Human Services explicitly stated in 2012 that the nondiscrimination provision in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act includes people who identify as gender diverse,<sup>75,76</sup> insurance claims for gender affirmation, particularly among youth who identify as TGD, are frequently denied.<sup>54,77</sup> In 1 study, it was found that approximately 25% of individuals

who identified as transgender were denied insurance coverage because of being transgender.<sup>31</sup> The burden of covering medical expenses that are not covered by insurance can be financially devastating, and even when expenses are covered, families describe high levels of stress in navigating and submitting claims appropriately.<sup>78</sup> In 2012, a large gender center in Boston, Massachusetts, reported that most young patients who identified as transgender and were deemed appropriate candidates for recommended gender care were unable to obtain it because of such denials, which were based on the premise that gender dysphoria was a mental disorder, not a physical one, and that treatment was not medically or surgically necessary.<sup>24</sup> This practice not only contributes to stigma, prolonged gender dysphoria, and poor mental health outcomes,<sup>77</sup> but it may also lead patients to seek nonmedically supervised treatments that are potentially dangerous.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, insurance denials can reinforce a socioeconomic divide between those who can finance the high costs of uncovered care and those who cannot.<sup>24,77</sup>

The transgender youth group in Seattle likely reflected the larger TGD population when they described how obstacles adversely affect self-esteem and contribute to the perception that they are undervalued by society and the health care system.<sup>74,77</sup> Professional medical associations, including the AAP, are increasingly calling for equity in health care provisions regardless of gender identity or expression.<sup>1,8,23,72</sup> There is a critical need for investments in research on the prevalence, disparities, biological underpinnings, and standards of care relating to gender-diverse populations. Pediatric providers who work with state government and insurance officials can play an essential role in advocating for



stronger nondiscrimination policies and improved coverage.

There is a lack of quality research on the experience of youth of color who identify as transgender. One theory suggests that the intersection of racism, transphobia, and sexism may result in the extreme marginalization that is experienced among many women of color who identify as transgender,<sup>79</sup> including rejection from their family and dropping out of school at younger ages (often in the setting of rigid religious beliefs regarding gender),<sup>80</sup> increased levels of violence and body objectification,<sup>81</sup> 3 times the risk of poverty compared with the general population,<sup>31</sup> and the highest prevalence of HIV compared with other risk groups (estimated as high as 56.3% in 1 meta-analysis).<sup>30</sup> One model suggests that pervasive stigma and oppression can be associated with psychological distress (anxiety, depression, and suicide) and adoption of risk behaviors by such youth to obtain a sense of validation toward their complex identities.<sup>79</sup>

### **FAMILY ACCEPTANCE**

Research increasingly suggests that familial acceptance or rejection ultimately has little influence on the gender identity of youth; however, it may profoundly affect young people's ability to openly discuss or disclose concerns about their identity. Suppressing such concerns can affect mental health.<sup>82</sup> Families often find it hard to understand and accept their child's gender-diverse traits because of personal beliefs, social pressure, and stigma.<sup>49,83</sup> Legitimate fears may exist for their child's welfare, safety, and acceptance that pediatric providers need to appreciate and address. Families can be encouraged to communicate their concerns and questions. Unacknowledged concerns can contribute to shame and hesitation in regard to offering support and understanding.<sup>84</sup>

which is essential for the child's self-esteem, social involvement, and overall health as TGD.<sup>48,85–87</sup> Some caution has been expressed that unquestioning acceptance per se may not best serve questioning youth or their families. Instead, psychological evidence suggests that the most benefit comes when family members and youth are supported and encouraged to engage in reflective perspective taking and validate their own and the other's thoughts and feelings despite divergent views.<sup>49,82</sup>

In this regard, suicide attempt rates among 433 adolescents in Ontario who identified as “trans” were 4% among those with strongly supportive parents and as high as 60% among those whose parents were not supportive.<sup>85</sup> Adolescents who identify as transgender and endorse at least 1 supportive person in their life report significantly less distress than those who only experience rejection. In communities with high levels of support, it was found that nonsupportive families tended to increase their support over time, leading to dramatic improvement in mental health outcomes among their children who identified as transgender.<sup>88</sup>

Pediatric providers can create a safe environment for parents and families to better understand and listen to the needs of their children while receiving reassurance and education.<sup>83</sup> It is often appropriate to assist the child in understanding the parents' concerns as well. Despite expectations by some youth with transgender identity for immediate acceptance after “coming out,” family members often proceed through a process of becoming more comfortable and understanding of the youth's gender identity, thoughts, and feelings. One model suggests that the process resembles grieving, wherein the family separates from their expectations for their child to embrace a new reality. This process may proceed through stages of shock,

denial, anger, feelings of betrayal, fear, self-discovery, and pride.<sup>89</sup> The amount of time spent in any of these stages and the overall pace varies widely. Many family members also struggle as they are pushed to reflect on their own gender experience and assumptions throughout this process. In some situations, youth who identify as TGD may be at risk for internalizing the difficult emotions that family members may be experiencing. In these cases, individual and group therapy for the family members may be helpful.<sup>49,78</sup>

Family dynamics can be complex, involving disagreement among legal guardians or between guardians and their children, which may affect the ability to obtain consent for any medical management or interventions. Even in states where minors may access care without parental consent for mental health services, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections, parental or guardian consent is required for hormonal and surgical care of patients who identify as TGD.<sup>72,90</sup> Some families may take issue with providers who address gender concerns or offer gender-affirming care. In rare cases, a family may deny access to care that raises concerns about the youth's welfare and safety; in those cases, additional legal or ethical support may be useful to consider. In such rare situations, pediatric providers may want to familiarize themselves with relevant local consent laws and maintain their primary responsibility for the welfare of the child.

### **SAFE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**

Youth who identify as TGD are becoming more visible because gender-diverse expression is increasingly admissible in the media, on social media, and in schools and communities. Regardless of whether a youth with a gender-diverse

identity ultimately identifies as transgender, challenges exist in nearly every social context, from lack of understanding to outright rejection, isolation, discrimination, and victimization. In the US Transgender Survey of nearly 28 000 respondents, it was found that among those who were out as or perceived to be TGD between kindergarten and eighth grade, 54% were verbally harassed, 24% were physically assaulted, and 13% were sexually assaulted; 17% left school because of maltreatment.<sup>31</sup> Education and advocacy from the medical community on the importance of safe schools for youth who identify as TGD can have a significant effect.

At the time of this writing,\* only 18 states and the District of Columbia had laws that prohibited discrimination based on gender expression when it comes to employment, housing, public accommodations, and insurance benefits. Over 200 US cities have such legislation. In addition to basic protections, many youth who identify as TGD also have to navigate legal obstacles when it comes to legally changing their name and/or gender marker.<sup>54</sup> In addition to advocating and working with policy makers to promote equal protections for youth who identify as TGD, pediatric providers can play an important role by developing a familiarity with local laws and organizations that provide social work and legal assistance to youth who identify as TGD and their families.

School environments play a significant role in the social and emotional development of children. Every child has a right to feel safe

and respected at school, but for youth who identify as TGD, this can be challenging. Nearly every aspect of school life may present safety concerns and require negotiations regarding their gender expression, including name/pronoun use, use of bathrooms and locker rooms, sports teams, dances and activities, overnight activities, and even peer groups. Conflicts in any of these areas can quickly escalate beyond the school's control to larger debates among the community and even on a national stage.

The formerly known Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), an advocacy organization for youth who identify as LGBTQ, conducts an annual national survey to measure LGBTQ well-being in US schools. In 2015, students who identified as LGBTQ reported high rates of being discouraged from participation in extracurricular activities. One in 5 students who identified as LGBTQ reported being hindered from forming or participating in a club to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students (eg, a gay straight alliance, now often referred to as a genders and sexualities alliance) despite such clubs at schools being associated with decreased reports of negative remarks about sexual orientation or gender expression, increased feelings of safety and connectedness at school, and lower levels of victimization. In addition, >20% of students who identified as LGBTQ reported being blocked from writing about LGBTQ issues in school yearbooks or school newspapers or being prevented or discouraged by coaches and school staff from participating in sports because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.<sup>91</sup>

One strategy to prevent conflict is to proactively support policies and protections that promote inclusion and safety of all students. However, such policies are far from

consistent across districts. In 2015, GLSEN found that 43% of children who identified as LGBTQ reported feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression, but only 6% reported that their school had official policies to support youth who identified as TGD, and only 11% reported that their school's antibullying policies had specific protections for gender expression.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, more than half of the students who identified as transgender in the study were prevented from using the bathroom, names, or pronouns that aligned with their asserted gender at school. A lack of explicit policies that protected youth who identified as TGD was associated with increased reported victimization, with more than half of students who identified as LGBTQ reporting verbal harassment because of their gender expression. Educators and school administrators play an essential role in advocating for and enforcing such policies. GLSEN found that when students recognized actions to reduce gender-based harassment, both students who identified as transgender and cisgender reported a greater connection to staff and feelings of safety.<sup>91</sup> In another study, schools were open to education regarding gender diversity and were willing to implement policies when they were supported by external agencies, such as medical professionals.<sup>92</sup>

Academic content plays an important role in building a safe school environment as well. The 2015 GLSEN survey revealed that when positive representations of people who identified as LGBTQ were included in the curriculum, students who identified as LGBTQ reported less hostile school environments, less victimization and greater feelings of safety, fewer school absences because of feeling unsafe, greater feelings of connectedness to their school

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\* For more information regarding state-specific laws, please contact the AAP Division of State Government Affairs at [stgov@aap.org](mailto:stgov@aap.org).

community, and an increased interest in high school graduation and postsecondary education.<sup>91</sup> At the time of this writing,\* 8 states had laws that explicitly forbade teachers from even discussing LGBTQ issues.<sup>54</sup>

## MEDICAL EDUCATION

One of the most important ways to promote high-quality health care for youth who identify as TGD and their families is increasing the knowledge base and clinical experience of pediatric providers in providing culturally competent care to such populations, as recommended by the recently released guidelines by the Association of American Medical Colleges.<sup>93</sup> This begins with the medical school curriculum in areas such as human development, sexual health, endocrinology, pediatrics, and psychiatry. In a 2009–2010 survey of US medical schools, it was found that the median number of hours dedicated to LGBTQ health was 5, with one-third of US medical schools reporting no LGBTQ curriculum during the clinical years.<sup>94</sup>

During residency training, there is potential for gender diversity to be emphasized in core rotations, especially in pediatrics, psychiatry, family medicine, and obstetrics and gynecology. Awareness could be promoted through the inclusion of topics relevant to caring for children who identify as TGD in the list of core competencies published by the American Board of Pediatrics, certifying examinations, and relevant study materials. Continuing education and maintenance of certification activities can include topics relevant to TGD populations as well.

\* For more information regarding state-specific laws, please contact the AAP Division of State Government Affairs at [stgov@aap.org](mailto:stgov@aap.org)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The AAP works toward all children and adolescents, regardless of gender identity or expression, receiving care to promote optimal physical, mental, and social well-being. Any discrimination based on gender identity or expression, real or perceived, is damaging to the socioemotional health of children, families, and society. In particular, the AAP recommends the following:

1. that youth who identify as TGD have access to comprehensive, gender-affirming, and developmentally appropriate health care that is provided in a safe and inclusive clinical space;
2. that family-based therapy and support be available to recognize and respond to the emotional and mental health needs of parents, caregivers, and siblings of youth who identify as TGD;
3. that electronic health records, billing systems, patient-centered notification systems, and clinical research be designed to respect the asserted gender identity of each patient while maintaining confidentiality and avoiding duplicate charts;
4. that insurance plans offer coverage for health care that is specific to the needs of youth who identify as TGD, including coverage for medical, psychological, and, when indicated, surgical gender-affirming interventions;
5. that provider education, including medical school, residency, and continuing education, integrate core competencies on the emotional and physical health needs and best practices for the care of youth who identify as TGD and their families;
6. that pediatricians have a role in advocating for, educating, and developing liaison relationships

with school districts and other community organizations to promote acceptance and inclusion of all children without fear of harassment, exclusion, or bullying because of gender expression;

7. that pediatricians have a role in advocating for policies and laws that protect youth who identify as TGD from discrimination and violence;
8. that the health care workforce protects diversity by offering equal employment opportunities and workplace protections, regardless of gender identity or expression; and
9. that the medical field and federal government prioritize research that is dedicated to improving the quality of evidence-based care for youth who identify as TGD.

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**ABBREVIATIONS**

AAP: American Academy of Pediatrics  
GACM: gender-affirmative care model  
GLSEN: Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network  
LGBTQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning  
TGD: transgender and gender diverse

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# The 2019 National School Climate Survey

The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay,  
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Youth in Our Nation's Schools

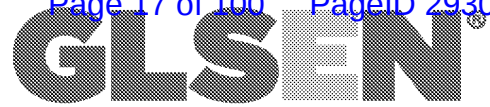


A Report from GLSEN  
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# The 2019 National School Climate Survey

The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer  
Youth in Our Nation's Schools

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**GLSEN** is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. Established in 1990, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. GLSEN seeks to develop school climates where difference is valued for the positive contribution it makes to creating a more vibrant and diverse community. For more information on our educator resources, research, public policy agenda, student leadership programs, or development initiatives, visit [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).

Graphic design: Adam Fredericks

Quotes throughout are from students' responses to open-ended questions in the survey.

Electronic versions of this report and all other GLSEN research reports are available at [www.glsen.org/research](http://www.glsen.org/research).

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# PREFACE

Youth gather march in the 2005 Chicago Pride Parade and demand safer schools for LGBTQ students. Youth marched with GLSEN's Chicago chapter, which evolved to become what is now known as the Illinois Safe Schools Alliance.







In the Fall of 1999, researchers and advocates gathered in a hotel meeting room in Atlanta to discuss the crippling lack of data available about the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. GLSEN's first "Research Roundtable" was designed to spark new directions of inquiry in academia, and the development of new knowledge that would guide efforts of advocates and service providers to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ youth nationwide. At the same time, GLSEN conducted its first national survey of LGBTQ+ students to begin bridging that gap in knowledge, a study that became the biennial GLSEN National School Climate Survey (NSCS). Within a year, we began building our independent research capacity.

Over time, the NSCS has helped rally LGBTQ+ students and their allies, illustrating the deep impact of the problem, making the case for the interventions that work, and enabling us to track our progress over time. Beyond the NSCS, the GLSEN Research Institute produces analysis and reports on all facets of LGBTQ+ issues in K-12 education, informing on-going work across the education world and the movement to support LGBTQ+ youth. Today, LGBTQ+ youth-focused organizations in more than 30 other countries are pursuing similar efforts, and GLSEN is proud to partner with them in a growing research revolution for LGBTQ+ youth.

The report in your hands now builds on twenty years of work, our long term commitment to producing the evidence for action on LGBTQ+ issues in K-12 education. In this report, we see that the slowing of progress noted in 2017 has continued. Harassment and discrimination remain at unacceptable levels at the national level.

However, given the vicious attacks we have witnessed over the past four years, particularly on transgender youth, it is remarkable that dedicated educators and active student advocates have held the line as powerfully as they have. Despite the tenor of our times, we also find that more and more LGBTQ+ youth have access to the vital in-school supports that can change their lives for the better, particularly as GSA student clubs continue to emerge in more schools nationwide. Increasing presence of the supports can be a leading indicator for positive changes in school climate, making this another sign of hope for the future.

As one of the conveners of that first Research Roundtable, I am amazed by what this research revolution has made possible, both across the U.S. and, bit by bit, around the world. May this edition of GLSEN's National School Climate Survey inspire all those who continue to hold the line, fighting to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ youth today and secure a better future for us all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eliza Byard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eliza" being more prominent than the last name "Byard".

Eliza Byard, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
GLSEN

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



GLSEN Student Ambassadors learn the ins and outs of media production at the KABC-TV studios during the 2014 Ambassador Summit, where they met with industry professionals and learned about using their voices to advocate for change.





## ABOUT THE SURVEY

In 1999, GLSEN identified that little was known about the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth and that LGBTQ youth were nearly absent from national studies of adolescents. We responded to this national need for data by launching the first National School Climate Survey, and we continue to meet this need for current data by conducting the study every two years. Since then, the biennial National School Climate Survey has documented the unique challenges LGBTQ students face and identified interventions that can improve school climate. The study documents the prevalence of indicators of a hostile school climate for LGBTQ students, and explores the effects that a hostile school climate may have on LGBTQ students' educational outcomes and well-being. The study also examines the availability and the utility of LGBTQ-related school resources and supports that may offset the negative effects of a hostile school climate and promote a positive learning experience. In addition to collecting this critical data every two years, we also add and adapt survey questions to respond to the changing world for LGBTQ youth. For example, in the 2019 survey we included questions about the activities of LGBTQ-supportive student clubs. The National School Climate Survey remains one of the few studies to examine the school experiences of LGBTQ students nationally, and its results have been vital to GLSEN's understanding of the issues that LGBTQ students face, thereby informing our ongoing work to ensure safe and affirming schools for all.

In our 2019 report, we examine the experiences of LGBTQ students with regard to indicators of negative school climate:

- Hearing biased remarks, including homophobic remarks, in school;
- Feeling unsafe in school because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation, gender expression, or race/ethnicity;
- Missing classes or days of school because of safety reasons;
- Experiencing harassment and assault in school; and
- Experiencing discriminatory policies and practices at school.

In addition, we examine whether students report these experiences to school officials or their families, and how these adults addressed the problem. Further, we examine the impact of a hostile school climate on LGBTQ students' academic achievement, educational aspirations and psychological well-being. We also examine how the school experiences of LGBTQ students vary by personal and community characteristics.

We also demonstrate the degree to which LGBTQ students have access to supportive resources in school, and we explore the possible benefits of these resources:

- GSAs (Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances) or similar clubs;
- Supportive and inclusive school policies, such as anti-bullying/harassment policies and transgender and nonbinary student policies;
- Supportive school staff; and
- Curricular resources that are inclusive of LGBTQ-related topics.

Given that GLSEN has been conducting the survey for two decades, we also examine changes over time on indicators of negative school climate and levels of access to LGBTQ-related resources in schools.

## METHODS

The 2019 National School Climate Survey was conducted online from April through August 2019. To obtain a representative national sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, we conducted outreach through national, regional, and local organizations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBTQ youth, and advertised and promoted on social media sites, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. To ensure representation of transgender youth, youth of color, and youth in rural communities, we made special efforts to notify groups and organizations that work predominantly with these populations.

The final sample consisted of a total of 16,713 students between the ages of 13 and 21. Students were from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and Guam. Just over two-thirds of the sample (69.2%) was White, two-fifths (41.6%) was cisgender female, and 40.4% identified as gay or lesbian. The average age of students in the sample was 15.5 years and they were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers in grades 9, 10 and 11.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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### *Hostile School Climate*

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Schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBTQ language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. As a result, many LGBTQ students avoid school activities or miss school entirely.

#### **School Safety**

- 59.1% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 42.5% because of their gender expression, and 37.4% because of their gender.
- 32.7% of LGBTQ students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, 8.6% missed four or more days in the past month.
- Many avoided gender-segregated spaces in school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable: 45.2% avoided bathrooms and 43.7% avoided locker rooms.
- Most reported avoiding school functions (77.6%) and extracurricular activities (71.8%) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Nearly a fifth of LGBTQ students (17.1%) reported having ever changed schools due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at school.

#### **Anti-LGBTQ Remarks at School**

- Almost all LGBTQ students (98.8%) heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “that’s so gay”) at school; 75.6% heard these remarks frequently or often, and 91.8% reported that they felt distressed because of this language.
- 96.9% of LGBTQ students heard the phrase “no homo” at school, and 60.9% heard this phrase frequently or often.
- 95.2% of LGBTQ students heard other types of homophobic remarks (e.g., “dyke” or “faggot”); 54.4% heard this type of language frequently or often.



- 91.8% of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough”); 53.2% heard these remarks frequently or often.
- 87.4% of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks specifically about transgender people, like “tranny” or “he/she;” 43.7% heard them frequently or often.
- 52.4% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 66.7% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff.
- Less than one-fifth of LGBTQ students (13.7%) reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing homophobic remarks at school, and less than one-tenth of LGBTQ students (9.0%) reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing negative remarks about gender expression.

### **Harassment and Assault at School**

The vast majority of LGBTQ students (86.3%) experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, actual or perceived religion, actual or perceived race and ethnicity, and actual or perceived disability.

- 68.7% of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened) at school based on sexual orientation, 56.9% based on gender expression, and 53.7% based on gender.
- 25.7% of LGBTQ students were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year based on sexual orientation, 21.8% based on gender expression, and 22.2% based on gender.
- 11.0% of LGBTQ students were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year based on sexual orientation, 9.5% based on gender expression, and 9.3% based on gender.
- A sizable number of LGBTQ students were also bullied or harassed at school based on other characteristics – 36.5% based on actual or perceived disability, 23.1% based on actual or perceived religion, and 21.4% based on actual or perceived race or ethnicity.
- 44.9% of LGBTQ students experienced electronic harassment in the past year (via text messages or postings on Facebook), often known as cyberbullying.
- 58.3% of LGBTQ students were sexually harassed (e.g., unwanted touching or sexual remarks) in the past year at school.

### **Student Reporting of Harassment and Assault Incidents**

- 56.6% of LGBTQ students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or the situation could become worse if reported.
- 60.5% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response or told the student to ignore it.

### **Discriminatory School Policies and Practices**

Most LGBTQ students (59.1%) reported personally experiencing any LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school. Specifically, LGBTQ students reported being:

- Prevented from using bathrooms aligned with their gender identity: 28.4%.
- Disciplined for public displays of affection that were not similarly disciplined among non-LGBTQ students: 28.0%.
- Prevented from using locker rooms aligned with their gender identity: 27.2%.
- Prevented from using chosen names/pronouns: 22.8%.
- Prevented from wearing clothes considered “inappropriate” based on gender: 18.3%.
- Prohibited from discussing or writing about LGBTQ topics in school assignments: 16.6%.
- Prohibited from including LGBTQ topics in school extracurricular activities: 16.3%.
- Restricted from forming or promoting a GSA: 14.7%.
- Prevented from wearing clothing or items supporting LGBTQ issues: 10.7%.
- Prevented or discouraged from participating in school sports because they were LGBTQ: 10.2%.
- Prevented from attending a dance or function with someone of the same gender: 7.6%.
- Disciplined for simply identifying as LGBTQ: 3.0%.

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### ***Effects of a Hostile School Climate***

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A hostile school climate affects students’ academic success and mental health. LGBTQ students who experience victimization and discrimination at school have worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being.

#### **Effects of Victimization**

- LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation:
  - Were nearly three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (57.2% vs. 21.7%);
  - Had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than students who were less often harassed (3.03 vs. 3.34);
  - Were nearly twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school) than those who experienced lower levels (9.9% vs. 5.8%);
  - Were nearly twice as likely to have been disciplined at school (47.0% vs. 26.7%); and
  - Had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression.
- LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on their gender expression:
  - Were almost three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (59.0% vs. 21.8%);
  - Had lower GPAs than students who were less often harassed (2.98 vs. 3.36);

- Were twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school; 11.1% vs. 5.4%);
  - Were more likely to have been disciplined at school (46.8% vs. 27.2%), and
  - Had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression.
- Of the LGBTQ students who indicated that they were considering dropping out of school, a sizable percentage (42.2%) indicated that it was related to the harassment they faced at school.

### **Effects of Discrimination**

- Compared to LGBTQ students who did not experience LGBTQ-related discrimination at school, those who experienced discrimination:
  - Were nearly three times as likely to have missed school in the past month (44.1% vs. 16.4%);
  - Had lower GPAs (3.14 vs. 3.39);
  - Were more likely to have been disciplined at school (40.2% vs. 22.6%); and
  - Had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression.
- Of the LGBTQ students who indicated that they were considering dropping out of school, a sizable percentage (30.1%) indicated that it was related to the hostile climate created by gendered school policies and practices.

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### ***LGBTQ-Related School Resources and Supports***

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Students who feel safe and supported at school have better educational outcomes. LGBTQ students who have LGBTQ-related school resources report better school experiences and academic success. Unfortunately, all too many schools fail to provide these critical resources.

### **GSA (Gay-Straight Alliances/Gender and Sexuality Alliances)**

#### *Availability and Participation*

- Most LGBTQ students (61.6%) said that their school had a GSA or similar student club.
- Most LGBTQ students with a GSA at school reported participating in the club at some level, but more than a third (38.2%) had not.

#### *Utility*

- Compared to LGBTQ students who did not have a GSA in their school, students who had a GSA in their school:
  - Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (70.5% vs. 83.5%);
  - Were less likely to hear the phrase “no homo” often or frequently (57.4% vs. 66.4%);
  - Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently (49.4% vs. 62.5%);



- Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently (49.3% vs. 59.5%);
- Were less likely to hear negative remarks about transgender people often or frequently (39.9% vs. 50.0%);
- Were more likely to report that school personnel intervened when hearing homophobic remarks — 16.4% vs. 9.4% reporting that staff intervened most of the time or always;
- Were less likely to feel unsafe regarding their sexual orientation (53.6% vs. 67.4%) and gender expression (40.2% vs. 46.0%);
- Were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns (28.4% vs. 39.6%);
- Experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression;
- Reported a greater number of supportive school staff and more accepting peers; and
- Felt greater belonging to their school community.

### **Inclusive Curricular Resources**

#### *Availability*

- Only 19.4% of LGBTQ students were taught positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events in their schools; 17.0% had been taught negative content about LGBTQ topics.
- Only 8.2% of students reported receiving LGBTQ-inclusive sex education.
- Just under half of students (48.9%) reported that they could find information about LGBTQ-related issues in their school library.
- Just over half of students with internet access at school (55.9%) reported being able to access LGBTQ-related information online via school computers.

#### *Utility*

- Compared to students in school without an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ students in schools with an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum:
  - Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (59.2% vs. 79.8%);
  - Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently (38.6% vs. 58.3%);
  - Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently (30.1% vs. 47.2%);
  - Were less likely to hear negative remarks about transgender people often or frequently (41.8% vs. 56.0%);
  - Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (44.4% vs. 62.7%) and gender expression (33.5% vs. 44.7%);

- Experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression;
- Were less likely to miss school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (23.2% vs. 35.0%);
- Performed better academically in school (3.32 vs. 3.23 average GPA) and were more likely to plan on pursuing post-secondary education;
- Were more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBTQ people (66.9% vs. 37.9%); and
- Felt greater belonging to their school community.

### **Supportive Educators**

#### *Availability*

- Almost all LGBTQ students (97.7%) could identify at least one staff member supportive of LGBTQ students at their school.
- Approximately two-thirds of students (66.3%) could identify at least six supportive school staff.
- Only 42.3% of students could identify 11 or more supportive staff.
- Just over two-fifths of students (42.4%) reported that their school administration was somewhat or very supportive of LGBTQ students.
- Over half of students (62.8%) had seen at least one Safe Space sticker or poster at their school (these stickers or posters often serve to identify supportive educators).

#### *Utility*

- Compared to LGBTQ students with no or few supportive school staff (0 to 5), students with many (11 or more) supportive staff at their school:
  - Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (44.8% vs. 74.2%) and less likely to feel unsafe because of their gender expression (33.6% vs. 51.3%);
  - Were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (21.3% vs. 45.9%);
  - Had higher GPAs (3.34 vs. 3.14);
  - Were less likely to say they might not graduate high school and more likely to plan on pursuing post-secondary education; and
  - Felt greater belonging to their school community.
- Students who had seen a Safe Space sticker or poster in their school were more likely to identify school staff who were supportive of LGBTQ students.

## Inclusive and Supportive School Policies

### *Availability*

- Although a majority of students (79.1%) had an anti-bullying policy at their school, only 13.5% of students reported that their school had a comprehensive policy (i.e., one that specifically enumerates both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression).
- Only 10.9% of LGBTQ students reported that their school or district had official policies or guidelines to support transgender or nonbinary students.

### *Utility*

- LGBTQ students in schools with a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy:
  - Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (63.4% vs. 77.6% of students with a generic policy and 79.0% of students with no policy);
  - Were less likely to hear the phrase “no homo” often or frequently (55.3% vs. 61.8% of students with a generic policy and 62.5% of students with no policy);
  - Were less likely to hear other homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently (43.9% vs. 55.7% of students with a generic policy and 58.8% of students with no policy);
  - Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently (42.5% vs. 54.7% of students with a generic policy and 56.5% of students with no policy);
  - Were less likely to hear negative remarks about transgender people often or frequently (35.4% vs. 44.5% of students with a generic policy and 47.5% of students with no policy);
  - Were more likely to report that staff intervened when hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks than those with a generic policy or no policy;
  - Experienced less anti-LGBTQ victimization than those with a generic policy or no policy; and
  - Were more likely to report victimization incidents to school staff and were more likely to rate school staff’s responses to such incidents as effective than those with a generic policy or no policy.
- Among transgender and nonbinary students, those in schools with transgender/nonbinary student policies or guidelines:
  - Were less likely to experience anti-LGBTQ discrimination in their school than transgender and nonbinary students in schools without such policies and guidelines. Specifically, they were:
    - ~ Less likely to be prevented from using their name or pronoun of choice in school (18.8% vs. 44.9%);
    - ~ Less likely to be prevented from using bathrooms aligned with their gender (26.7% vs. 53.6%);
    - ~ Less likely to be prevented from using locker rooms aligned with their gender (25.6% vs. 50.7%); and
    - ~ Less likely to be prevented from wearing clothes thought to be “inappropriate” based on gender (6.9% vs. 23.9%);



- Were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (36.5% vs. 42.4%) than transgender and nonbinary students in schools without such policies and guidelines; and
- Felt greater belonging to their school community than transgender and nonbinary students in schools without such policies and guidelines.

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### ***Changes in School Climate for LGBTQ Students Over Time***

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Although school climate for LGBTQ students has improved overall since our first installment of this survey in 1999, school remains quite hostile for many LGBTQ students. In 2019, we saw more positive changes than we had in the 2017 installment of this survey, but not as much positive change as in prior years.

#### **Changes in Indicators of Hostile School Climate**

##### *Anti-LGBTQ Remarks*

- The frequency with which LGBTQ students heard homophobic remarks like “fag” or “dyke” was lower in 2019 than in all prior years, and there was a general downward trend in hearing homophobic remarks from 2001 to 2015, but these remarks remained consistent between 2015 and 2017.
- The expression “that’s so gay” remains the most common form of anti-LGBTQ language heard by LGBTQ students, and its prevalence has been increasing from 2015 to 2019, after years of consistent decline.
- There was a sizeable increase in the frequency of LGBTQ students hearing “no homo” at school in 2019, after a consistent pattern of decline between 2011 and 2017.
- Negative remarks about gender expression have decreased from 2017 to 2019.
- The frequency of hearing negative remarks about transgender people decreased between 2017 and 2019, after a steady increase between 2013 and 2017.
- After a steady decline in homophobic remarks from school staff between 2007 and 2013, there was no change from 2013 to 2017. In 2019, however, homophobic remarks from staff decreased once again.
- There had been an upward trend from 2013 to 2017 in the frequency of staff making negative remarks about gender expression, however these remarks decreased in 2019 to levels that are similar to our findings from 2015.

##### *Harassment and Assault*

- With regard to victimization based on sexual orientation:
  - After years of decline, the frequency of verbal harassment has not changed from 2015 to 2019; and
  - Frequencies of physical harassment resumed a pattern of decline in 2019 after no change occurred in 2017, and frequencies of physical assault resumed a pattern of decline in 2019 after no change occurred in 2015 and 2017.
- With regard to victimization based on gender expression:
  - Frequencies of verbal harassment resumed a pattern of decline in 2019, following an increase between 2015 and 2017; and

- Physical harassment and assault continued a pattern of modest decline, and were lower in 2019 than all previous years.
- The frequency of LGBTQ students reporting victimization to school staff in 2019 was similar to 2017 and greater than nearly all other years; however, the frequency of students rating staff intervention as effective in 2019 has remained similar from 2013 to 2017, and is somewhat lower than prior years.

#### *Discriminatory Policies and Practices*

- For all time points since we began asking about LGBTQ-related discrimination in 2013, over half of LGBTQ students experienced this type of discrimination at school. In 2019, students were less likely to experience any type of discrimination than in 2013 and 2017.
- For most specific types of LGBTQ-related discrimination, incidence was greatest in 2013, and for certain gender-specific forms of discrimination — including being prevented from using facilities aligned with one's gender, and being prevented from using chosen name/pronouns — incidence was greatest in 2017. However, incidence for most types of discrimination was lower in 2019 than in previous years.

### **Changes in Availability of LGBTQ-Related School Resources and Supports**

#### *Supportive Student Clubs (GSAs)*

- The percentage of LGBTQ students reporting that they have a GSA has continued to increase since 2007, and was greater in 2019 than in all prior survey years.

#### *Curricular Resources*

- Overall, there has been little change in LGBTQ-related curricular resources over time.
  - Access to LGBTQ-related internet resources through school computers increased in 2019 and has steadily increased since 2007;
  - Access to LGBTQ-related books and library resources increased in 2019 and was higher than all previous years; and
  - The percentage of LGBTQ students who were taught positive LGBTQ-related content in class, as well as those with LGBTQ inclusion in textbooks and class resources, did not change in 2019 from 2017.
- The percentage being taught negative LGBTQ-related content in class increased between 2013 and 2015, and has not changed since 2015.

#### *Supportive Educators*

- The percentage of students who had at least one supportive educator was higher in 2019 than all previous years.
- The percentage of students who had a high number of supportive educators (6 or more) was also higher in 2019 than all previous years.

#### *Anti-Bullying/Harassment Policies*

- Overall, there was a sharp increase in the number of students reporting any type of policy after 2009, and the rate has remained more or less consistent since 2011. After small increases from 2011 to

2015, and a small decline in 2017, the number of students with any type of policy did not change in 2019.

- With regard to enumerated policies, there was a small but significant increase in the percentage of students reporting comprehensive school policies (i.e., policies that enumerate protections for both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) from 2015 to 2017 and this percentage did not change in 2019. Further, there has been a steady, modest decline in the percentage reporting partially enumerated policies from 2015 to 2019, and the rate was lower in 2019 than all prior years.

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### ***Differences in LGBTQ Students' School Experiences by Personal Demographics***

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LGBTQ students are a diverse population, and although they share many similar experiences, their experiences in school often vary based on their personal demographics. We examined differences in LGBTQ student experiences, based on: 1) sexual orientation, including differences between gay and lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and questioning students; 2) gender identity, including differences between and among transgender, nonbinary, cisgender, and questioning students; and 3) racial/ethnic identity, including differences between Arab American/Middle Eastern/North African (MENA), Asian American/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian (AAPI), Black, Latinx, Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native (referred to as "Native and Indigenous"), multiracial, and White LGBTQ students.

#### **Sexual Orientation**

- Overall, pansexual students experienced more hostile climates than gay and lesbian, bisexual, queer, and questioning students, including facing the highest rates of victimization, school discipline, and missing school because of safety reasons.
- Compared to students of other sexual orientations, gay and lesbian students were more likely to be "out" about their sexual orientation at school – both to other students and to school staff.

#### **Gender**

- Transgender students reported more hostile school experiences than LGBQ cisgender students and nonbinary students.
- Nonbinary students reported more hostile school experiences than cisgender LGBQ students.
- Among cisgender LGBQ students, male students experienced a more hostile school climate based on their gender expression and on sexual orientation than cisgender female students, whereas cisgender female students experienced a more hostile school climate based on their gender than cisgender male students.

#### **Race and Ethnicity**

- All students of color experienced similar levels of victimization based on race/ethnicity, although Black students were more likely to feel unsafe about their race/ethnicity than AAPI, Latinx, Native and Indigenous, multiracial, and White students.
- Native and Indigenous LGBTQ students were generally more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to experience anti-LGBTQ victimization and discrimination.
- Many LGBTQ students of color experienced victimization based on both their race/ethnicity and their LGBTQ identities. The percentages of students of color experiencing these multiple forms of victimization were similar across racial/ethnic groups.



- White students were less likely than all other racial/ethnic groups to feel unsafe or experience victimization because of their racial/ethnic identity.

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### ***Differences in LGBTQ Students' School Experiences by School Characteristics***

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LGBTQ students' experiences in school may often vary based on the kind of school they attend and where they live.

#### **School Level**

- LGBTQ students in middle school had more hostile school experiences than LGBTQ students in high school, including experiencing higher rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices.
- LGBTQ middle school students were less likely than high school students to have access to LGBTQ-related school resources, including GSAs, supportive school personnel, LGBTQ-inclusive curricular resources, and inclusive policies.

#### **School Type**

- Overall, LGBTQ students in private non-religious schools had fewer hostile school experiences than those in public schools and those in religious schools.
- LGBTQ public school students were most likely to hear homophobic remarks at school and experienced the greatest levels of gender-based victimization, whereas those in religious schools were most likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression.
- Students in religious schools were the most likely to report experiencing anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices.
- Students in private non-religious schools had greater access to most LGBTQ-related school resources and supports than all others, however public school students were most likely to report having a GSA and most likely to report having LGBTQ-inclusive school library resources. Students in religious schools were least likely to have access to LGBTQ-related school resources and supports.
- Among students in public schools, those in charter schools were similar to those in regular public schools regarding anti-LGBTQ experiences and many resources and supports, although charter school students were more likely to have access to: inclusive curricular resources, supportive policies for transgender and nonbinary students, and a supportive administration. Students in regular public schools were more likely to have LGBTQ-inclusive school library resources.

#### **School Locale**

- LGBTQ students in rural schools faced more hostile school climates than students in urban and suburban schools including experiencing higher rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices.
- LGBTQ students in suburban schools experienced lower levels of anti-LGBTQ victimization than all others.
- LGBTQ students in rural schools were least likely to have LGBTQ-related school resources or supports, as compared to students in urban and suburban schools.

## Region

- LGBTQ students in the South had more negative school experiences overall than students in all other regions, including higher rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices; those in the Midwest had more negative experiences overall than those in the Northeast and West.
- Overall, LGBTQ students in the South were least likely to have access to LGBTQ-related resources at school, whereas students in the Northeast were most likely to have LGBTQ-related school resources.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that there is an urgent need for action to create safe and affirming learning environments for LGBTQ students. Results from the 2019 National School Climate Survey demonstrate the ways in which school-based supports — such as supportive staff, inclusive and supportive school policies, curricular resources inclusive of LGBTQ people, and GSAs — can positively affect LGBTQ students' school experiences. Yet findings on school climate over time suggest that more efforts are needed to reduce harassment and discrimination and increase affirmative supports. Based on these findings, we recommend:

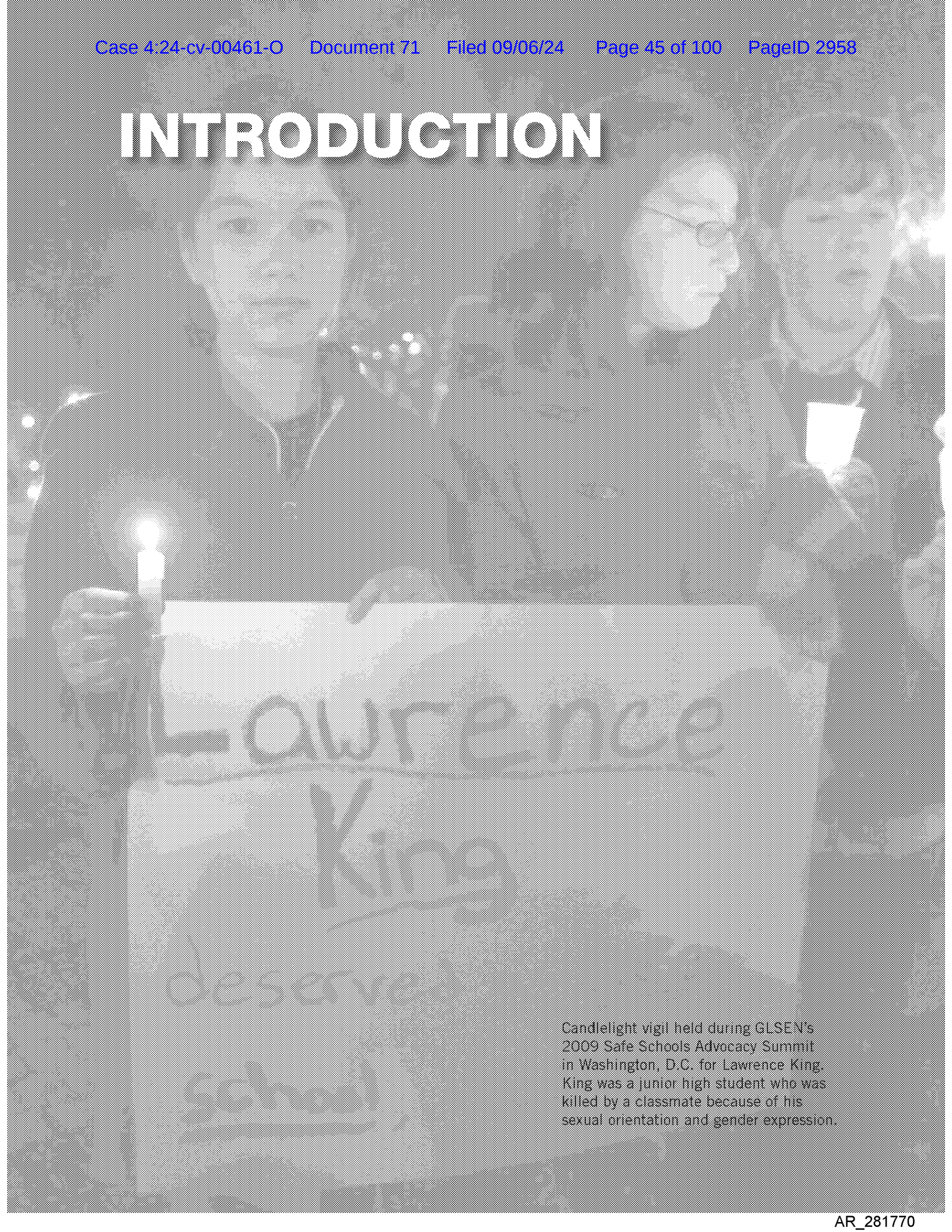
- Increasing student access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBTQ people, history, and events through inclusive curricula, and library and internet resources;
- Supporting student clubs, such as GSAs, that provide support for LGBTQ students and address LGBTQ issues in education;
- Providing professional development for school staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive teachers and other staff available to students;
- Ensuring that school policies and practices, such as those related to dress codes and school dances, do not discriminate against LGBTQ students;
- Enacting school policies that provide transgender and gender nonbinary students equal access to school facilities and activities and specify appropriate educational practices to support these students; and
- Adopting and implementing comprehensive bullying/harassment policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in individual schools and districts, with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience.

Instituting these measures can move us toward a future in which all students have the opportunity to learn and succeed in school, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.





# INTRODUCTION



Candlelight vigil held during GLSEN's 2009 Safe Schools Advocacy Summit in Washington, D.C. for Lawrence King. King was a junior high student who was killed by a classmate because of his sexual orientation and gender expression.





For nearly 30 years, GLSEN has worked to ensure that schools are safe and affirming spaces for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. As part of its mission, GLSEN conducts research on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender identity issues in education to raise awareness among policymakers, educators, advocates, and the general public. In 1999, GLSEN began conducting the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (NSCS), a national biennial survey of secondary school students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and as identities change over time, later surveys included those who identify also as pansexual, queer, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, two-spirit, and other non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities. (All aforementioned identities are referred to as “LGBTQ” in this report). The NSCS explores the experiences of U.S. LGBTQ middle and high school students, reports on the prevalence of anti-LGBTQ language, discrimination, and victimization, and the impact that these experiences have on LGBTQ students’ educational outcomes and well-being. The NSCS also examines the availability of school resources and supports and their utility for creating safer and more affirming learning environments for LGBTQ students, including GSAs (Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances) and similar supportive student clubs, LGBTQ-inclusive curricular resources, supportive educators, and inclusive and supportive school district policies.

Since our 2017 NSCS report, we have continued to see the Federal Government roll back many LGBTQ-supportive actions of the previous administration, sending a message to LGBTQ youth that their safety is not a priority. In 2017, the Departments of Justice and Education under the Trump administration rescinded guidance<sup>1</sup> created under the Obama administration that had declared that Title IX protects the rights of transgender students, including their right to access school facilities, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, in accordance with their gender identity. (Title IX is a federal civil rights law prohibiting discrimination based on sex in schools that receive federal funding.) Further, in 2018 it was revealed that under U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, the Department of Education was failing to investigate complaints of discrimination by LGBTQ students. Compared to the actions of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) during the Obama administration, since the start of the Trump

administration, LGBTQ students’ complaints of discrimination were less likely to result in the OCR opening a formal investigation, and such complaints were more than nine times less likely to be addressed and corrected.<sup>2</sup>

The Equality Act, a bill that would establish anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people in all federally funded programs, including in schools, was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in May of 2019. After passing in the House, the Trump administration released guidance opposing the passage of the bill, and it failed to pass in the Senate. Without these protections, LGBTQ students, educators, and other staff remain vulnerable to discrimination in school. Further, the Trump administration has worked to expand religious exemptions from federal civil rights laws.<sup>3</sup> Such exemptions allow private religious schools to discriminate against students and teachers based on their sexual orientation or gender identity without any legal consequences. Additionally, DeVos has worked diligently to divert public money from public schools to private and religious schools,<sup>4</sup> which would reduce public school resources while financially strengthening schools that can legally discriminate based on LGBTQ identity.

At the state level however, we have seen some progress in addressing hostile climates for LGBTQ youth. Between 2017 and 2019, numerous states passed LGBTQ affirming legislation. For example, New Mexico passed an enumerated anti-bullying and harassment bill in 2019, becoming the 21st state to prohibit students from being discriminated against based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>5</sup> Illinois, New Jersey, Oregon, and Colorado passed legislation requiring LGBTQ-inclusive curricular standards in 2019,<sup>6</sup> increasing the number of students in the U.S. who will be exposed to positive representations of LGBTQ people and issues. Arizona also took a step toward greater curricular inclusion in 2019 when the state repealed its “No Promo Homo” law<sup>7</sup> — a type of law which restricts LGBTQ curricular inclusion in health class, and which has been shown to have broad negative effects on school climate.<sup>8</sup>

Between 2017 and 2019, many discriminatory state-level bills that were introduced during this time focused on restricting transgender students’ participation in school sports teams, and limiting their access to public spaces, including bathrooms



and locker rooms.<sup>9</sup> For example, six states in 2018 and four states in 2019 introduced bills to bar transgender people, including transgender students, from using the bathrooms or locker rooms that align with their gender. Although these bills failed to become laws, they have sparked local, state-wide, and national conversations about the rights of transgender and nonbinary people, which may have resulted in negative attention toward transgender and nonbinary students across the country. Indeed, although public opinions about LGBTQ people have improved over time, recent public polling shows more favorable attitudes about the rights of LGBTQ people than about transgender people and their rights.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the visibility of transgender and nonbinary issues brought to the fore by federal and state actions, there has been increasing visibility in popular culture.<sup>11</sup> Television shows with young audiences, such as *One Day at a Time*, *Supergirl*, and *Pose* tell stories about transgender and nonbinary characters, and many shows feature transgender characters played by transgender actors. Additionally, films, young adult novels, and national ad campaigns have featured transgender and nonbinary people in recent years. Transgender Day of Remembrance and International Day of Transgender Visibility are recognized by celebrities and influencers across social media. Now, more than ever before, transgender youth are able to find positive representations of themselves in the media and popular culture that they consume. This representation has resulted in heightened visibility of transgender and nonbinary people and issues, yet this heightened visibility has also come with increased transphobic rhetoric and sentiment.<sup>12</sup> Vocal opponents to the progress of transgender and nonbinary people have gained large followings on social media, and “trans exclusionary radical feminists,” who espouse transphobic ideas about gender, have been given platforms in respected news and media outlets.<sup>13</sup> As transgender and nonbinary people gain more visibility and representation, they also face more opposition.

Despite this increase in visibility regarding transgender and nonbinary youth, there still remains a dearth of national-level data on the school experiences of these young people. Much of the academic literature that has been recently published about transgender and nonbinary youth has focused on mental and physical health.<sup>14</sup> Less research has examined the educational

environments or school experiences of transgender and nonbinary youth. Furthermore, virtually none of the U.S. research is national in scope. One notable exception is the National Center for Transgender Equality's (NCTE) series of reports based on their U.S. Transgender Survey, a survey of transgender adults that includes critical national data about their past school experiences, among other topics. The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey documented high rates of violence at school, and illustrated the detrimental effects of these experiences on socioeconomic outcomes and psychological well-being.<sup>15</sup> NCTE's study found that 12% of the sample had been out as transgender or perceived to be transgender at some point in their K-12 school years, that the majority of these respondents (77%) had experienced one or more negative experiences at school, and that nearly a fifth (17%) left school because of mistreatment. However, because the NCTE study is a survey of adults, these questions were about past school experiences, and therefore may not be representative of the current experiences of transgender and nonbinary students in school.

Although there has been a lack of national-level data specifically examining the school experiences of transgender and nonbinary youth, more work has been done to examine LGBTQ youth in general. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) added questions about sexual orientation to the federal and standard versions of their Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) in 2015. Additionally, CDC DASH has begun asking students about transgender identity. In 2017, this question was piloted in 19 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) sites, and in 2019 the item was approved for use as an optional question available for all YRBSS sites to use. These changes will allow policymakers and educators to collect state and local data about, and better understand, the experiences of transgender youth in their states or localities. Most recent results from the national 2017 YRBS data reveal that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are at greater risk for most adverse health outcomes, including school violence.<sup>16</sup> Further, the 2017 YRBS results from the 19 locations that asked about transgender identity similarly reveal a greater risk for adverse health outcomes among transgender students, compared to their cisgender peers.<sup>17</sup> The Trevor Project's National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health from 2019<sup>18</sup> contributes

invaluable data about LGBTQ youth's mental health and information on how to best provide care and support; however, their research contains limited information about school experiences. Given that the YRBS is focused specifically on health risk behaviors, and the Trevor Project's report is focused on mental health, both surveys include limited items specifically related to the school environment. GLSEN's National School Climate survey continues to be vitally important to the understanding of the school experiences of LGBTQ students nationally.

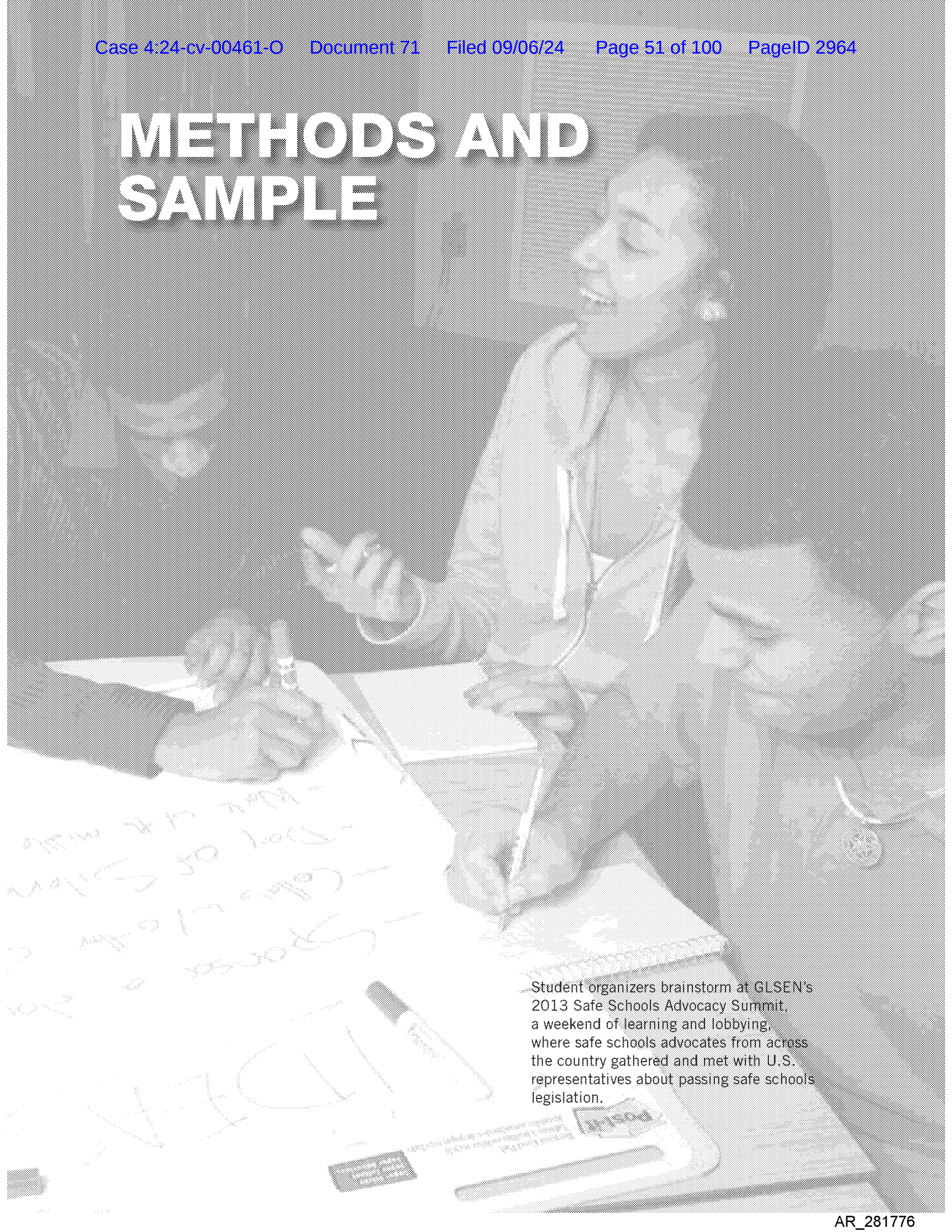
The 2019 NSCS offers a broad understanding of the policies, practices, and conditions that make LGBTQ students more vulnerable to discrimination and victimization at school and how these experiences impact their educational success and trajectories. This report also demonstrates the resilience of LGBTQ youth, even in the face of hostile environments, and highlights the ways LGBTQ students are engaging in school and taking steps to improve their schools and communities. Given that we have been conducting the NSCS for twenty years, we continue to examine changes over time on measures of school climate and levels of

access to LGBTQ-related resources in schools. In recognition of the 20th anniversary of our National School Climate Survey, this year's report includes multiple insights that take a closer look at changes in LGBTQ youth and identities over time, while centering the experiences of the most marginalized youth. We examine how youth's endorsement of different sexual orientation and gender identity terms and labels has evolved, how transgender students' experiences with discriminatory policies and practices has changed throughout the years, how the experiences of LGBTQ youth of color have changed with regard to race-based victimization, and how anti-immigrant bias experienced by LGBTQ youth has changed in recent years. In addition, as there has been tremendous growth in the number of GSAs in schools across the United States over the past 20 years, we provide a deeper examination into the role of these supportive clubs in schools and LGBTQ students' experiences with them. The 2019 NSCS report offers advocates, educators, and policymakers up-to-date and valuable information that will strengthen their work in creating safe and affirming schools for all students.





# METHODS AND SAMPLE



Student organizers brainstorm at GLSEN's 2013 Safe Schools Advocacy Summit, a weekend of learning and lobbying, where safe schools advocates from across the country gathered and met with U.S. representatives about passing safe schools legislation.





Participants completed an online survey about their experiences in school during the 2018–2019 school year, including hearing biased remarks, feeling safe, being harassed, feeling comfortable at school, and experiencing discriminatory actions. Participants were also asked about their academic experiences, attitudes about school, involvement in school, and availability of supportive school resources. Youth were eligible to participate in the survey if they were at least 13 years of age, attended a K–12 school in the United States during the 2018–19 school year, and identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (e.g., homoflexible, questioning) or described themselves as transgender or as having another gender identity that is not cisgender (“cisgender” describes a person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex/gender they were assigned at birth). Data collection occurred between April and August 2019.

The survey was available online through GLSEN’s website. The survey and survey outreach materials were available in English and Spanish. Notices and announcements were sent through GLSEN’s email and chapter networks, SMS messages to GLSEN constituents, and on GLSEN’s social media pages including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Additionally, national, regional, and local organizations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBTQ youth posted notices about the survey on listservs, websites, and social network accounts. Local organizations serving LGBTQ youth and GLSEN chapters also notified their participants about the online survey via paper flyers, and promotional stickers. To ensure representation of transgender and gender nonconforming youth, youth of color, and youth in rural communities, additional outreach efforts were made to notify groups and organizations that work predominantly with these populations about the survey.

Contacting participants only through LGBTQ youth-serving groups and organizations would have limited our ability to reach LGBTQ students

who were not connected to or engaged in LGBTQ communities in some way. Thus, in order to broaden our reach to LGBTQ students who may not have had such connections, we conducted targeted outreach and advertising through social media sites. Specifically, we broadly advertised the survey on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to U.S. users between 13 and 18 years of age who had interests aligned with LGBTQ communities and issues. To ensure representation of groups who have historically been underrepresented in national surveys of LGBTQ youth and past GLSEN surveys, including transgender girls, LGBTQ youth of color, and cisgender gay, bisexual, and queer boys, additional advertisements were targeted specifically to these groups. Additionally, GLSEN reached out to “influencers,” or well-known young actors and social media personalities, with large LGBTQ youth audiences and asked them to post or talk about the survey on their social media pages. Information about the survey was also posted on subgroups or pages of social media sites with significant LGBTQ youth content or LGBTQ youth followers. Lastly, advertisements for the survey were placed on digital billboards in malls and shopping centers in cities across the country.

The final sample consisted of a total of 16,713 students between the ages of 13 and 21. Students came from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and Guam. Table M1 presents participants’ demographic and educational characteristics, and Table M2 shows the characteristics of the schools attended by participants. As shown in Table M1, 69.2% was White, 41.6% was cisgender female, and 40.4% identified as gay or lesbian. Students were in grades 6 to 12, and most participants were in 9th, 10th, and 11th grades (see also Table M1). As shown in Table M2, the majority of LGBTQ students were in public schools (89.8%) and nearly half (45.2%) were from suburban schools. Compared to national public school enrollment<sup>19</sup>, our sample included more students from the North and Midwest and fewer students from the South.<sup>20</sup>

## Insight on Emerging Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Terms Over Time

Over the last 20 years, sexual orientation and gender identities have changed and evolved. LGBTQ youth in 2020 identify in countless different ways, whereas in the early 2000s, they may have more commonly identified with the terms “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and “transgender.” As new identity terms arose through the years, and as youth began to endorse them, our survey adapted to account for the current sexual orientation and gender identity labels being endorsed by LGBTQ youth. Thus, we believe our surveys may provide some insight into when identity terms emerged among LGBTQ youth, as new sexual orientation and gender identities were added to sexual orientation and gender identity measure items after being endorsed by youth throughout the years.

In 2001, the second iteration of the National School Climate Survey, an option was provided for students to write in their sexual orientation or gender identity if they identified as something different from the provided options. These open-ended response options, and the youth voices that the responses allowed us to capture, have been vital in adapting how we ask about students' LGBTQ identities.

**Queer.** In our 2001 survey, “queer” was not listed as an option on our sexual orientation item, but was written in by over 20 students. In the following years, students continued to write in “queer” as their sexual orientation at a growing rate. It was the most popular write-in response in 2005, and was added as an option in all later surveys.

**Pansexual.** Just as students wrote in “queer” in 2001, a few students also wrote in “pansexual.” Although “queer” was a more common write-in response than “pansexual” in the early years of the survey, “pansexual” gradually increased in frequency over time and became the most common write-in response before being added as an option to the sexual orientation item in 2015.

Although the terms “pansexual” and “bisexual” may share certain meaning, it became clear that “pansexual” is a discrete term, different from “bisexual,” given that “pansexual” continued to increase in usage over the years. Since “pansexual” was added to the sexual orientation item in 2015, the percentage of our sample identifying as pansexual has remained relatively consistent (just under 20% of the sample), as has the percentage of students identifying as bisexual (around a third of the sample).

**Asexual.** In 2003, one student wrote in “asexual” as their sexual orientation. Over the years, this term grew in frequency in write-in responses, often accompanied by romantic orientation terms such as “homoromantic” and “panromantic.” More specific asexual identities, such as “demisexual” and “graysexual,” have appeared and increased in more recent years. “Demisexual” first appeared in 2011, and “graysexual” in 2015. By the 2015 survey, almost 400 students had written in an asexual identity. In 2017, “asexual” was added as an option in the sexual orientation item.

**Genderqueer.** Gender identities have also emerged and evolved in the 20 years of NSCS survey administration. In 2001, there was one instance of a student identifying as “genderqueer,” and the number of students identifying their gender in this way continued to grow. Before being added as an option on the gender identity item in 2013, the only non-cisgender options listed for students to select were transgender identities.

**Nonbinary.** In more recent years, nonbinary identities have also emerged. “Nonbinary” first appeared in the write-in responses in 2011 and was written in by a small number of students in 2011 and 2013. However, a much larger number of students identified as nonbinary in 2015, and it was added to the survey in 2017.

Honoring youth voices and allowing them to report all the identities with which they are aligned has allowed us to better understand the emerging identities that youth have endorsed over the last 20 years. We believe that using this information to modify our identity items to better accommodate the current times and to represent a more diverse and large number of sexual orientation and sexual orientation identities, has allowed more youth to feel affirmed and visible in our survey. It has also been a benefit to our research, as we have become increasingly able to examine more nuanced differences in school experiences based on different sexual orientation and gender identities (You can read more about the differences in experiences of youth with different sexual orientation identities and different gender identities in the “School Climate by Sexual Orientation” and “School Climate by Gender” sections in Part 3 of this report).



| Table M.1 Demographic and Educational Characteristics of Survey Participants |       |   |       |
|--|-------|---|-------|
| <b>Sexual Orientation</b> <sup>21</sup> (n = 16578)                          |       | <b>Gender</b> <sup>26</sup> (n = 16632)                             |       |
| Gay or Lesbian   | 40.4% | Cisgender   | 51.4% |
| Bisexual   | 32.9% | Female  | 41.6% |
| Pansexual <sup>22</sup>  | 18.0% | Male  | 9.6%  |
| Queer  | 3.9%  | Nonbinary/Genderqueer   | 0.2%  |
| Asexual <sup>23</sup>  | 1.7%  | Transgender   | 28.2% |
| Another Sexual Orientation (e.g., fluid, heterosexual)                       | 1.2%  | Female  | 1.1%  |
| Questioning or Unsure  | 1.9%  | Male  | 16.9% |
|  |       | Nonbinary/Genderqueer   | 5.7%  |
|  |       | Unspecified   | 4.5%  |
| <b>Race and Ethnicity</b> <sup>24</sup> (n = 16631)                          |       | Nonbinary   | 15.1% |
| White  | 69.2% | Nonbinary or Genderqueer Only                                       | 9.8%  |
| Hispanic or Latinx, <sup>25</sup> any race                                   | 14.6% | Nonbinary or Genderqueer Female                                     | 2.6%  |
| African American or Black  | 2.6%  | Nonbinary or Genderqueer Male                                       | 0.5%  |
| Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiian                        | 3.1%  | Other Nonbinary Gender Identity (e.g., agender, demigender)         | 2.2%  |
| Arab American, Middle Eastern, or North African                              | 1.3%  | Questioning   | 5.3%  |
| Native American, American Indian or Alaska Native                            | 0.5%  |   |       |
| Multiracial  | 8.6%  | <b>Grade in School</b> (n = 16640)                                  |       |
|  |       | 6th   | 1.2%  |
|  |       | 7th   | 6.9%  |
| <b>Religious Affiliation</b> (n = 16657)                                     |       | 8th   | 14.5% |
| Christian (non-denominational)   | 12.3% | 9th   | 21.7% |
| Catholic   | 5.3%  | 10th  | 22.8% |
| Protestant   | 2.0%  | 11th  | 20.1% |
| Jewish   | 2.6%  | 12th  | 12.7% |
| Buddhist   | 1.1%  |   |       |
| Muslim   | 0.3%  | <b>Receive Educational Accommodations</b> <sup>27</sup> (n = 16598) |       |
| Hindu  | 0.3%  |   | 23.9% |
| Another Religion (e.g., Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, Pagan)               | 8.7%  | <b>Average Age</b> (n = 16713) = 15.5 years                         |       |
| No Religion, Atheist, or Agnostic  | 67.2% |   |       |
| <b>Sex at Birth</b> (n = 16676)  |       |   |       |
| Assigned Male  | 13.1% |   |       |
| Assigned Female  | 86.9% |   |       |
| Intersex (regardless of assigned sex)  | 0.6%  |   |       |

| Table M.2 Characteristics of Survey Participants' Schools |       |   |       |
|---|-------|---|-------|
| <b>Grade Level</b> (n = 16664)                            |       | <b>School Type</b> (n = 16529)          |       |
| K through 12 School                                       | 7.6%  | Public School                           | 89.8% |
| Lower School (elementary and middle grades)               | 1.7%  | <i>Charter</i>                          | 4.1%  |
| Middle School   | 15.8% | <i>Magnet</i>                           | 8.6%  |
| Upper School (middle and high grades)                     | 8.1%  | Religious-Affiliated School             | 3.7%  |
| High School   | 66.7% | Other Independent or Private School     | 6.5%  |
| <b>School Locale</b> (n = 16488)                          |       | <b>Region</b> <sup>28</sup> (n = 16695) |       |
| Urban   | 24.0% | Northeast                               | 21.5% |
| Suburban  | 45.2% | South                                   | 29.8% |
| Rural or Small Town                                       | 30.9% | Midwest                                 | 24.9% |
|   |       | West                                    | 23.4% |
|   |       | U.S. Territories                        | 0.4%  |



# PART ONE: EXTENT AND EFFECTS OF HOSTILE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Members of GLSEN's National Student Council march at the 2019 World Pride march in New York City, on the 50th anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots.









# School Safety

## Key Findings

- 6 in 10 LGBTQ students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation; 4 in 10 reported feeling unsafe at school because of how they expressed their gender.
- One-third of LGBTQ students missed at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe at or on their way to or from school.
- Nearly one-fifth of LGBTQ students reported having changed schools due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at school.
- LGBTQ students reported most commonly avoiding school bathrooms and locker rooms because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable in those spaces.
- Most LGBTQ students reported avoiding school functions and extracurricular activities to some extent, and over a quarter avoided them often or frequently.



### Overall Safety at School

For LGBTQ youth, school can be an unsafe place for a variety of reasons. Students in our survey were asked whether they ever felt unsafe at school because of a personal characteristic, including: sexual orientation, gender, gender expression (i.e., how traditionally “masculine” or “feminine” they were in appearance or behavior), body size or weight, family’s income or economic status, academic ability, citizenship status, and actual or perceived race or ethnicity, disability, and religion. Almost 8 in 10 LGBTQ students (79.6%) reported feeling unsafe at school because of at least one of these personal characteristics. As shown in Figure 1.1, LGBTQ students most commonly felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation or their gender expression,<sup>29</sup> with 68.9% reporting feeling unsafe for one, or both, of these reasons.

- More than half of LGBTQ students (59.1%) reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation.
- Four in ten students (42.5%) felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender.
- Sizable percentages of LGBTQ students also reported feeling unsafe because of their body size or weight (39.6%), gender (37.4%), emotional, developmental, or physical disability (29.5%), and because of their academic ability or how well they do in school (23.3%).

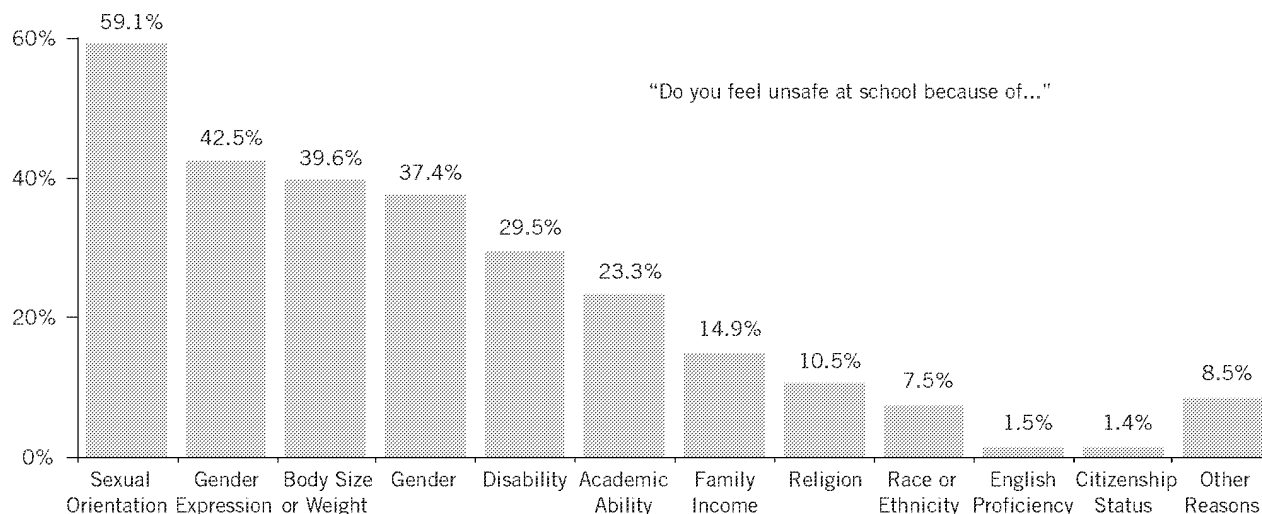
We also asked students to tell us if they felt unsafe at school for another reason not included in the listed characteristics and, if so, why. As also shown in Figure 1.1, 8.5% of survey participants reported feeling unsafe at school for other reasons, most commonly due to fear or threat of gun violence or other types of violence, mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, and sexually biased incidents, such as sexual violence, sexual harassment, or sexist language.

### School Engagement and Safety Concerns

When students feel unsafe or uncomfortable in school, they may choose to avoid the particular areas or activities where they feel most unwelcome or may feel that they need to avoid attending school altogether. Thus, a hostile school climate can impact an LGBTQ student’s ability to fully engage and participate with the school community.

**Avoiding spaces.** To examine this possible restriction of LGBTQ students’ school engagement, we asked LGBTQ students if there were particular spaces at school that they avoided specifically because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. As shown in Figure 1.2, school bathrooms, locker rooms, and physical education or gym classes were most commonly avoided, with approximately 4 in 10 students avoiding each of these spaces because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (45.2%, 43.7%, and 40.2% respectively). One-quarter of LGBTQ students avoided school athletic fields or facilities (25.1%) or the school cafeteria or lunchroom (25.9%) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

Figure 1.1 LGBTQ Students Who Felt Unsafe at School Because of Actual or Perceived Personal Characteristics



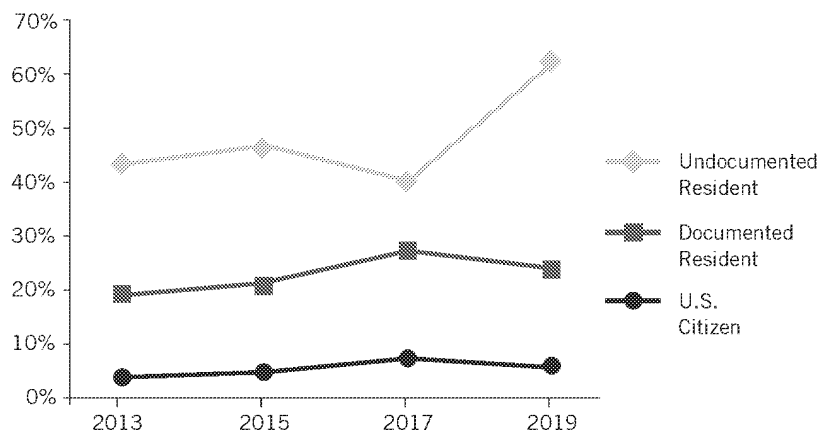
Increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric and government actions in recent years<sup>1</sup> further complicate an already complex environment negotiated by LGBTQ immigrants in the United States. Among LGBTQ youth, who already routinely experience negative classroom environments, those not born in the U.S. may experience further marginalization. For these reasons, in 2013, we began asking LGBTQ students about their feelings of safety at school regarding their citizenship status. Given the aforementioned recent increases in anti-immigrant attitudes and actions, for this report, we examined whether these feelings of safety have changed over time for foreign-born students.<sup>2</sup>

As shown in the figure, across all years, LGBTQ students who were undocumented were more likely to feel unsafe at school regarding their citizenship status than those who were documented residents as well as those who were U.S. citizens. We also found that even those LGBTQ students who were documented residents were more likely to feel unsafe in school regarding citizenship than those who were U.S. citizens across all years. From 2013 to 2019, as shown in the figure, these feelings of safety remained similar across years for each group, with one notable exception: undocumented LGBTQ students were significantly more likely to feel unsafe regarding their citizenship status in 2019 than in 2017. We did not observe any significant differences across years for foreign-born LGBTQ students who were U.S. citizens or documented residents.

Overall, these results suggest that, in addition to anti-LGBTQ harassment and discrimination, some LGBTQ immigrant students may also face challenges at school regarding their citizenship status. All students born outside the U.S. may face challenges with acculturation in the school environment,<sup>3</sup> as well as legal scrutiny over their right to reside in the U.S. at all. However, national anti-immigrant policy and rhetoric may exacerbate these challenges, especially for undocumented students. For example, in February 2019, a national state of emergency was declared to fund a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, in which undocumented immigrants were characterized as violent criminals.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it is not surprising that undocumented LGBTQ students were more likely than all other foreign-born LGBTQ students to feel unsafe regarding their citizenship status across all years, and that undocumented LGBTQ students in 2019 were more likely to report feeling unsafe for this reason than those in 2017. Our findings also underscore the importance of acknowledging the multiple identities held by LGBTQ students, and ensuring that programs and resources for and about LGBTQ students respond to the needs and experiences of immigrant students and their families.

Feeling Unsafe in School Because of Citizenship Status Among Foreign-Born LGBTQ Students



<sup>1</sup> Pierce, S. (2019). *Immigration-Related Policy Changes in the First Two Years of the Trump Administration*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

<sup>2</sup> To test differences in the percentages of LGBTQ students who were born outside the United States and its territories on feeling unsafe because of citizenship status over time, a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed, controlling for demographic and method differences across survey years, with two independent variables Survey Year and Citizenship Status (U.S. Citizen, Documented Resident, Undocumented Resident), and the interaction Survey Year X Citizenship Status. The main effect for Survey Year was significant:  $F(3, 1939) = 3.31, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . Pairwise differences were considered at  $p < .05$  and indicated that the percentage was higher in 2019 than all other years. The main effect for Citizenship Status was also significant:  $F(2, 1939) = 157.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$ . Pairwise differences indicated a higher percentage of feeling unsafe for Undocumented Residents than all others, and a higher percentage for Documented Residents compared to U.S. Citizens. The interaction term was also significant:  $F(6, 1939) = 2.82, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . Post-hoc t-test comparisons indicated a significant difference across years only for Undocumented Residents, specifically a significant increase from 2017 to 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Schwartz, S. J., Waterman, A. S., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Lee, R. M., Kim, S. Y., Vazsonyi, A. T., Huynh, Q.-L., Whitbourne, S. K., Park, I. J. K., Hudson, M., Zamboanga, B. L., Bersamin, M. M., & Williams, M. K. (2013). Acculturation and well-being among college students from immigrant families. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 69*(4), 298–318.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, J., & Naylor, B. (2019 February 15). As Trump declares national emergency to fund border wall, democrats promise a fight. National Public Radio. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/15/695012728/trump-expected-to-declare-national-emergency-to-help-fund-southern-border-wall>



**“I don’t feel very safe or accepted at my school at all. I feel like if I were to come out to my friends/classmates, I would be hated for just being who I am.”**

**Avoiding functions and extracurricular activities.**

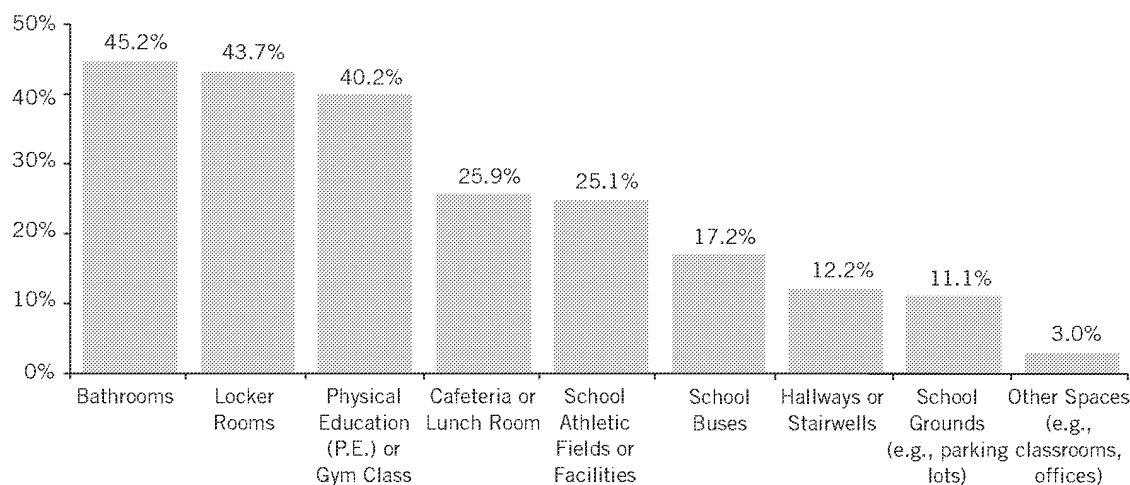
In addition to avoiding certain spaces in school because of safety reasons, LGBTQ students may also avoid other more social aspects of student life, for similar fears for personal safety. For any student, involvement in school community activities like clubs or special events can have a positive impact on students’ sense of belonging at school, self-esteem, and academic achievement.<sup>30</sup> However, LGBTQ students who do not feel safe or comfortable in these environments may not have full access to the benefits of engaging in these school activities. Thus, we specifically asked students if they avoided school functions, such as school dances or assemblies, and extracurricular clubs or programs because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. As seen in Figure 1.3, most LGBTQ students reported avoiding school functions and extracurricular activities to some extent (77.6% and 71.8%, respectively), and over a quarter

avoided them often or frequently (31.3% and 25.9%, respectively).

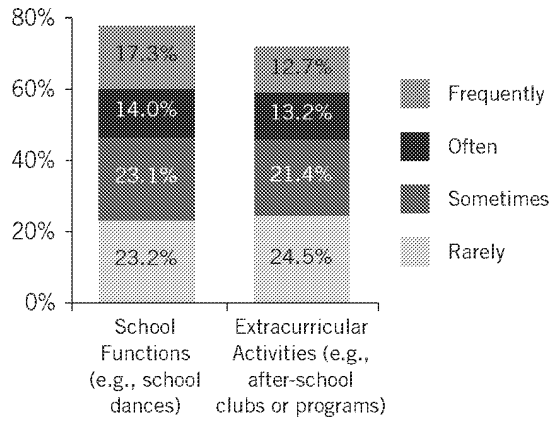
**Avoiding school.** Feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at school can negatively affect the ability of students to thrive and succeed academically, particularly if it results in avoiding school altogether. When asked about absenteeism, about one third of LGBTQ students (32.7%) reported missing at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and just under a tenth (8.6%) missed four or more days in the past month (see Figure 1.4). Additionally, in some cases, the school environment may be so hostile that some students need to leave their current school. In the 2017 survey, we asked students whether they had ever changed schools due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable; slightly less than a fifth of LGBTQ students (17.1%) reported having done so (see Figure 1.5).

The majority of LGBTQ youth do not feel safe at their schools because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity, and frequently avoid school spaces and activities at school. These high rates of avoiding school activities indicate that LGBTQ students may be discouraged from full participation in school life, and for some, are being denied access to their education because they avoid school altogether for safety reasons.

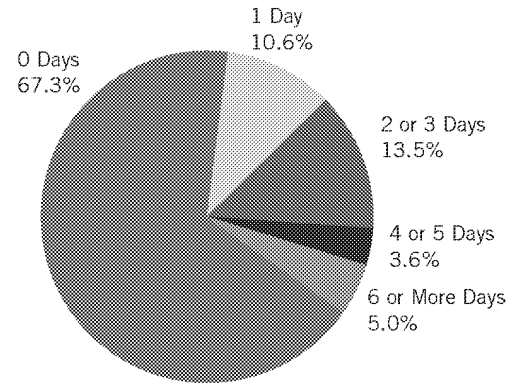
**Figure 1.2 Percentage of LGBTQ Students Who Avoided Spaces at School Because They Felt Unsafe or Uncomfortable**



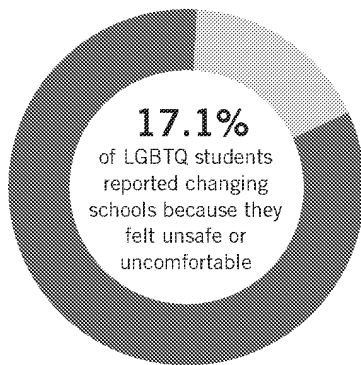
**Figure 1.3 LGBTQ Students Who Avoided School Activities Because They Felt Unsafe or Uncomfortable**



**Figure 1.4 Frequency of Missing Days of School in the Past Month Because of Feeling Unsafe or Uncomfortable**



**Figure 1.5 Percentage of LGBTQ Students Who Changed Schools Because of School Safety Concerns**







# Exposure to Biased Language

## Key Findings

- Three-fourths of LGBTQ students heard the word “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently at school.
- More than half of LGBTQ students heard the phrase “no homo” often or frequently at school.
- Over half of LGBTQ students heard homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently at school.
- More than half of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently at school. Remarks about students not acting “masculine enough” were more common than remarks about students not acting “feminine enough.”
- More than two-fifths of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks specifically about transgender people, such as “tranny” or “he/she,” often or frequently.
- More than half of LGBTQ students heard homophobic remarks from school staff, and two-thirds heard negative remarks from staff about students’ gender expression.
- Less than one-fifth of LGBTQ students reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing homophobic remarks at school, and nearly one-tenth of LGBTQ students reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing negative remarks about gender expression.
- More than 3 in 4 LGBTQ students heard sexist remarks often or frequently at school, and three-quarters of students heard negative remarks about ability (e.g., “retard” or “spaz”) often or frequently.
- Over half of LGBTQ students heard their peers make racist remarks often or frequently at school, and almost a fifth of students heard negative remarks about students’ immigration status often or frequently.



GLSEN strives to make schools safe and affirming for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or any other characteristic that may be the basis for harassment. Keeping classrooms and hallways free of homophobic, sexist, racist, and other types of biased language is one aspect of creating a more positive school climate for all students. Thus, we asked LGBTQ students about their experiences with hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks and other types of biased remarks while at school. We further asked students in our survey about school staff's usage of and responses to hearing anti-LGBTQ language, specifically.

### ***Hearing Anti-LGBTQ Remarks at School***

We asked students about the frequency with which they heard homophobic remarks (such as “faggot” and “dyke,” the word “gay” being used in a negative way, or the phrase “no homo”). We also asked about the frequency of hearing negative remarks about the way students expressed their gender at school (such as comments related to a female student not acting “feminine enough”) and negative remarks about transgender people (such as “tranny” or “he/she”). Further, we also asked students about the frequency of hearing these types of remarks from school staff, as well as whether anyone intervened when hearing this type of language at school.

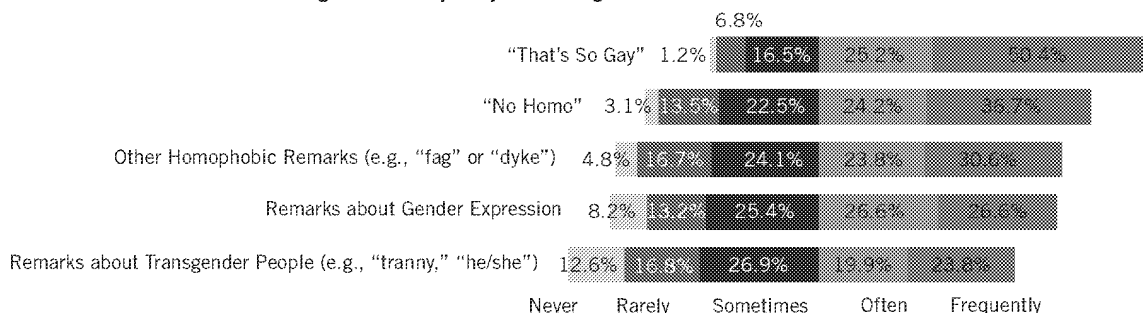
**Homophobic remarks.** As shown in Figure 1.6, more than half of LGBTQ students (54.4%) reported hearing homophobic remarks, such as “fag” or “dyke,” regularly (often or frequently) at school. The most common form of homophobic language that was heard by LGBTQ students in our survey was “gay” being used in a negative way at school, such as comments like “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay,”<sup>31</sup> with three-fourths of LGBTQ

students (75.6%) reporting that they heard these types of comments often or frequently in their schools. These expressions are often used to mean that something or someone is stupid or worthless and, thus, may be dismissed as innocuous by school authorities and students in comparison to overtly derogatory remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke.” However, 91.8% of LGBTQ students reported that hearing “gay” used in a negative manner caused them to feel bothered or distressed to some degree (see Figure 1.7).

“No homo” is a phrase employed at the end of a statement in order to rid it of a potential homosexual connotation. For instance, some might use the phrase after giving a compliment to someone of the same gender, as in, “I like your jeans—no homo.” This expression is homophobic in that it promotes the notion that it is unacceptable to have a same-gender attraction. This expression was also heard regularly by students in our 2019 survey — the majority of LGBTQ students (60.9%) reported hearing this remark often or frequently in their schools (see also Figure 1.6). We also asked LGBTQ students who heard homophobic remarks in school how pervasive this behavior was among the student population. As shown in Figure 1.8, almost a quarter of students (23.2%) reported that these types of remarks were made by most of their peers.

Students who reported hearing homophobic remarks at school were asked how often homophobic remarks were made in the presence of teachers or other school staff, and whether staff intervened when present. Almost a third of students in our survey (35.7%) reported that school staff members were present all or most of the time when homophobic remarks were made. When school staff were present, the use of biased and derogatory language by students remained

**Figure 1.6 Frequency of Hearing Anti-LGBTQ Remarks at School**



largely unchallenged. Nearly half (46.6%) reported that staff never intervened when hearing homophobic remarks, and only 13.7% reported that school personnel intervened most of the time or always when homophobic remarks were made in their presence (see Figure 1.9). One would expect teachers and school staff to bear the responsibility for addressing problems of biased language in school. However, given that school personnel are often not present during these incidents, students may also intervene when hearing biased language. Thus, other students' willingness to intervene when hearing this kind of language may be another important indicator of school climate. However, less than a tenth of students (6.4%) reported that their peers intervened always or most of the time when hearing homophobic remarks, and more than half (59.8%) said their peers never intervened (see also Figure 1.9).

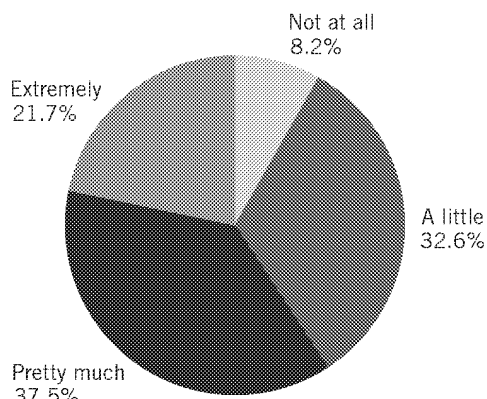
Altogether, these findings indicate that the majority of LGBTQ students report rampant usage of homophobic remarks in their schools, which contributes to a hostile learning environment for this population. Infrequent intervention by school authorities when hearing such language in school may also send a message to students that homophobic language is tolerated.

**Negative remarks about gender expression.** Society often imposes norms for what is considered appropriate expression of one's gender. Those who express themselves in a manner considered to be atypical may experience criticism, harassment, and sometimes violence. Thus, we asked students in our survey two separate questions about hearing comments related to a student's gender expression:

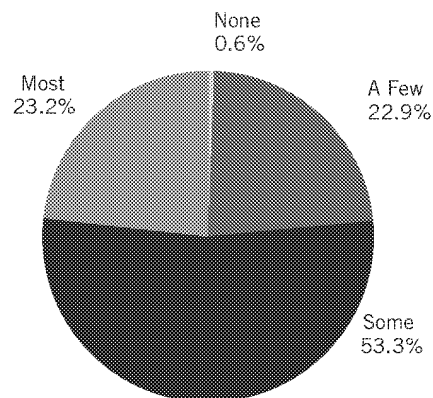
1) how often they heard remarks about someone not acting "masculine enough," and 2) how often they heard comments about someone not acting "feminine enough." Findings from this survey indicate that negative remarks about someone's gender expression were pervasive in schools. As previously shown in Figure 1.6, 53.2% of students reported hearing either type of remark often or frequently. Figure 1.10 shows the specific frequencies of the two variables: hearing remarks about other students not acting "masculine enough" and hearing remarks about other students not acting "feminine enough." Remarks related to students not acting "masculine enough" were found to be more common than remarks related to students not acting "feminine enough."<sup>32</sup> Nearly half of students (46.9%) heard negative comments related to students' masculinity regularly (i.e., often or frequently), compared to just under a third of students (31.9%) that regularly heard comments related to students' femininity. When asked how much of the student population made these types of remarks, almost a fifth of students (17.4%) reported that most of their peers made negative remarks about someone's gender expression (see Figure 1.11).

Almost a third of students in our survey who heard negative remarks about gender expression (30.7%) reported that school staff members were present all or most of the time when these remarks were made. In addition, intervention by educators regarding gender expression remarks was even less common than intervention for homophobic remarks — 9.0% of LGBTQ students reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when remarks about gender expression were made in their presence (see Figure 1.12),

**Figure 1.7 Degree that LGBTQ Students Were Bothered or Distressed as a Result of Hearing "Gay" Used in a Derogatory Way**



**Figure 1.8 LGBTQ Students' Reports of How Many Students Make Homophobic Remarks**





compared to 13.7% of LGBTQ students who reported that staff intervened most of the time or always for homophobic remarks (see Figure 1.9).<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, less than a tenth of students (8.6%) reported that other students intervened most of the time or always when negative remarks about gender expression were made.

The high frequency of hearing these remarks, coupled with the fact that these comments are so rarely challenged by adults at school, suggests that a range of gender expressions may not be commonly tolerated in schools. In addition, homophobic remarks may be more commonly understood by school personnel to be inappropriate for the school environment than are negative remarks about someone's gender expression, and greater education among school professionals may be needed for them to understand the contribution of gender bias to a hostile school environment.

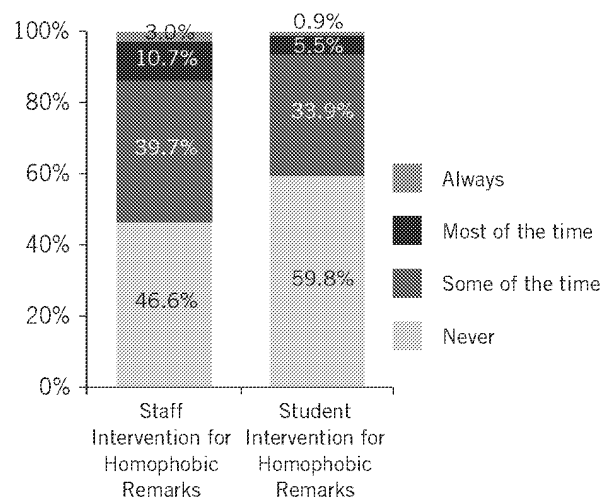
#### Negative remarks about transgender people.

Similar to negative comments about gender expression, people may make negative comments about transgender people because they can pose a

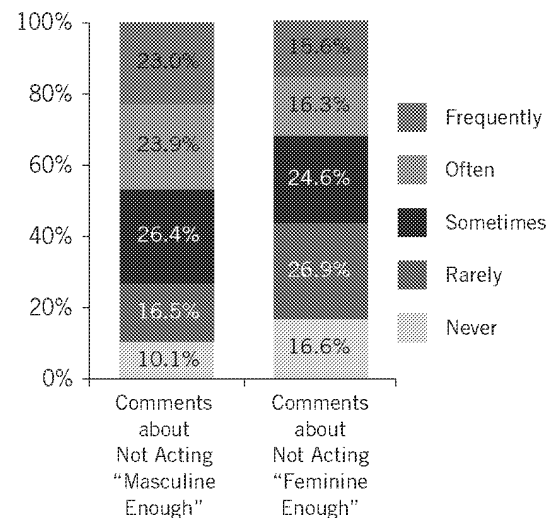
challenge to “traditional” ideas about gender. Also, in recent years, there has been greater transgender visibility in the media and more political attention to transgender student rights.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, we asked students about how often they heard negative remarks specifically about transgender people, like “tranny” or “he/she.” Over two-fifths of LGBTQ students in our survey (43.7%) reported hearing these comments often or frequently (see Figure 1.6).

The pervasiveness of anti-LGBTQ remarks is a concerning contribution to hostile school climates for all LGBTQ students. Any negative remark about sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression may signal to LGBTQ students that they are unwelcome in their school communities, even if a specific negative comment is not personally applicable to the individual student who hears it. For example, negative comments about gender expression may disparage transgender or LGB people, even if transgender-specific or homophobic slurs are not used.

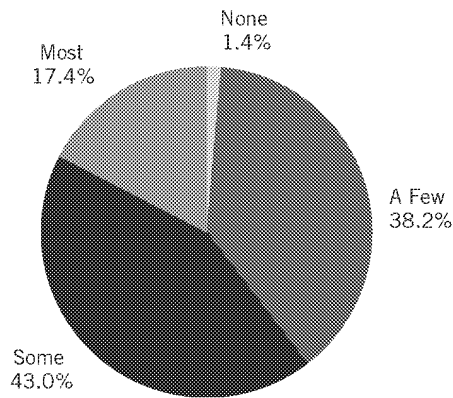
**Figure 1.9 LGBTQ Students' Reports of Staff and Student Intervention in Homophobic Remarks**



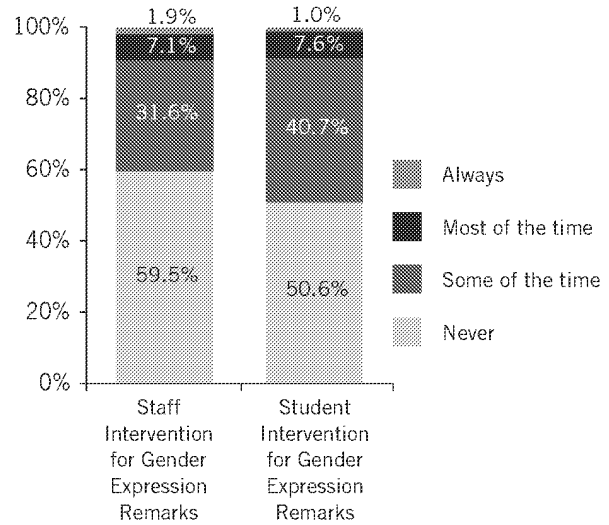
**Figure 1.10 Frequency of LGBTQ Students Hearing Different Types of Remarks about Students' Gender Expression**



**Figure 1.11 LGBTQ Students' Reports of How Many Students Make Negative Remarks about Gender Expression**



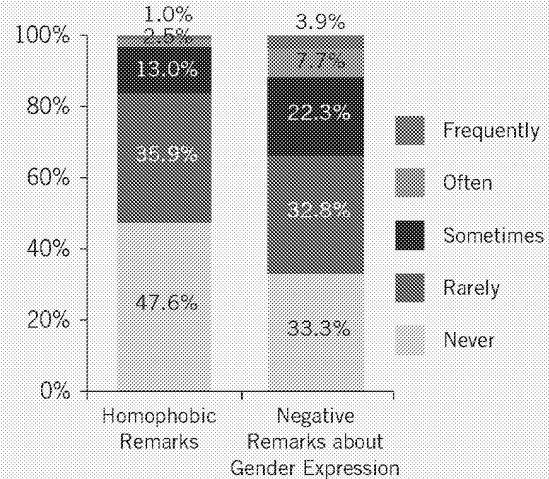
**Figure 1.12 LGBTQ Students' Reports of Staff and Student Intervention in Negative Remarks about Gender Expression**



### Anti-LGBTQ Remarks from School Personnel

We asked the students in our survey how often they hear homophobic remarks and negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff. Disturbingly, slightly more than half of students (52.4%) reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff (see Figure 1.13). Further, two thirds of students (66.7%) had heard teachers or other school staff make negative comments about a student's gender expression (see Figure 1.13). LGBTQ students heard school staff make negative remarks about gender expression more frequently than homophobic remarks.<sup>35</sup> In that most students in our 2019 survey heard school staff make homophobic remarks and negative remarks about gender expression themselves, school staff may be modeling poor behavior and legitimizing the use of anti-LGBTQ language.

**Figure 1.13 Frequency of LGBTQ Students Hearing Negative Remarks from Teachers or Other School Staff**



**“Many students at my school use offensive language about race, gender and sexuality which very few people do anything about.”**

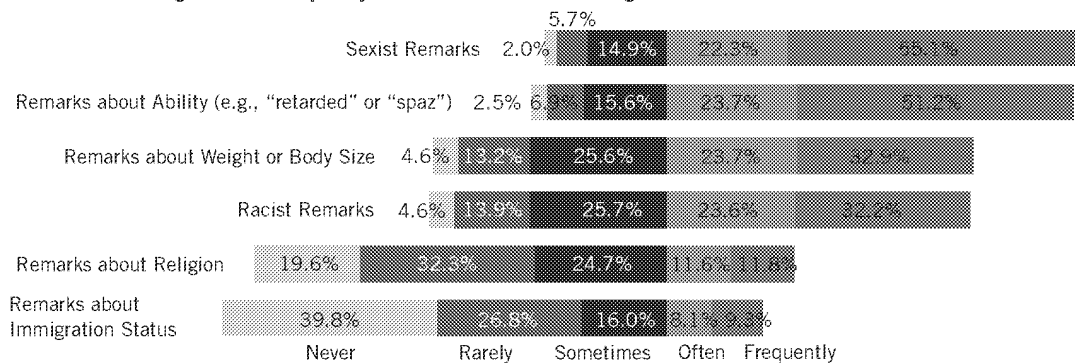
***Hearing Other Types of Biased Remarks at School***

In addition to hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks at school, hearing other types of biased language is also an important indicator of school climate for LGBTQ students. We asked students about their experiences hearing racist remarks, sexist remarks (such as someone being called “bitch” in a negative way, or girls being talked about as inferior to boys), negative remarks about other students’ ability (such as “retard” or “spaz”), negative remarks about other students’ religion, negative remarks about other students’ body size or weight, and negative remarks about students’ immigration status (such as “illegal,” “alien,” or “anchor baby”) at school. The LGBTQ students in our survey reported that many of these types of remarks were commonplace at their schools, although some comments were more prevalent than others (see Figure 1.14). The majority of LGBTQ students (77.4%) heard sexist remarks regularly (i.e., frequently or often) at their school. In fact, sexist remarks were the most commonly heard remark — even more than homophobic remarks.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the majority (74.9%) also

heard negative remarks about students’ ability/disability regularly. Negative remarks about students’ weight or body size and racist remarks were also very commonly heard types of biased remarks, with over half having heard these types of remarks regularly from other students (56.6% and 55.8%, respectively). Comments about religion were somewhat less common, with nearly a quarter (23.4%) reporting hearing negative remarks about other students’ religion from other students regularly. Least commonly heard were negative remarks about students’ immigration status, with almost a fifth (17.4%) reporting that they heard them regularly at school.

Hearing biased or derogatory language is a common occurrence at school, and most teachers and other school authorities did not consistently intervene when these remarks were made in their presence, with regard to homophobic remarks and negative remarks about gender expression. Thus, the pervasive use of biased language would remain largely unchallenged. In order to ensure schools are welcoming and safe for LGBTQ students, teachers and other school personnel need to intervene when LGBTQ-biased remarks are made in their presence, and school personnel need to make clear to students that such biased remarks will not be tolerated. Although homophobic and sexist remarks were most commonly heard at school, other types of remarks were also common, such as remarks about a student’s ability or body size or weight. As such, any type of biased remark tolerated in school can create an unwelcoming environment for all students, and especially for students with marginalized identities.

**Figure 1.14 Frequency of LGBTQ Students Hearing Other Biased Remarks in School**





# Experiences of Harassment and Assault at School

## Key Findings

- More than 8 in 10 LGBTQ students experienced harassment or assault at school.
- LGBTQ students were most commonly harassed or assaulted at school based on sexual orientation and gender expression.
- Over two-thirds of LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed at school due to their sexual orientation; more than half were verbally harassed because of their gender expression.
- A quarter of LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed at school due to their sexual orientation; over a fifth were physically harassed because of their gender expression.
- 1 in 7 LGBTQ students reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year due to their sexual orientation, gender, or gender expression.
- Over a third of LGBTQ students reported being bullied or harassed due to their actual or perceived disability, and more than 1 in 5 reported being harassed based on their religion and actual or perceived disability.
- Relational aggression (i.e. spreading rumors or deliberate exclusion) was reported by the vast majority of LGBTQ students.
- Over two-fifths of LGBTQ students reported experiencing some form of electronic harassment (“cyberbullying”) in the past year.
- Nearly 6 in 10 LGBTQ students were sexually harassed at school in the past year.



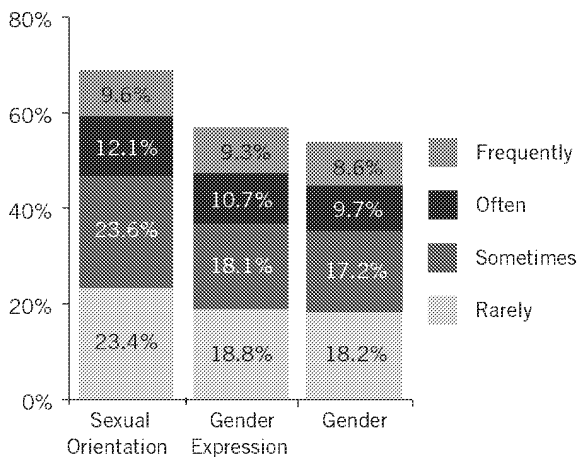
Hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks in school can contribute to feeling unsafe and create a negative learning environment. However, direct experiences with harassment and assault may have even more serious consequences on the lives of students. The vast majority of LGBTQ students (86.3%) experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, and actual or perceived race and ethnicity, religion, and disability.

### ***Harassment and Assault Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender, and Gender Expression***

We asked survey participants how often (“never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” “often,” or “frequently”) they had been verbally harassed, physically harassed, or physically assaulted at school during the past year specifically based on sexual orientation, gender, and gender expression (e.g., not acting “masculine” or “feminine enough”).

**Verbal harassment.** Students in our survey were asked how often in the past year they had been verbally harassed (e.g., been called names or threatened) at school specifically based on sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender. An overwhelming majority (81.0%) reported being verbally harassed at some point in the past year, and over a third (35.1%) experienced higher frequencies (often or frequently) of verbal harassment based on any of these characteristics. LGBTQ students most commonly reported experiencing verbal harassment at school based on their sexual orientation, followed by gender expression (see Figure 1.15):<sup>37</sup>

**Figure 1.15 Frequency of Verbal Harassment Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender, and Gender Expression Experienced by LGBTQ Students in the Past School Year**

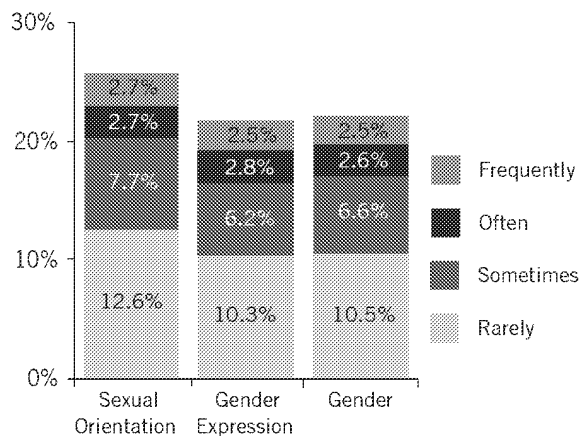


- More than two-thirds of LGBTQ students (68.7%) were verbally harassed at school in the past year based on their sexual orientation; over a fifth (21.7%) experienced this harassment often or frequently;
- A majority of LGBTQ students (56.9%) were verbally harassed at school in the past year based on their gender expression; a fifth (20.0%) experienced this harassment often or frequently;
- Over half of LGBTQ students (53.7%) were verbally harassed at school in the past year based on their gender; nearly a fifth (18.3%) experienced this harassment often or frequently.

**Physical harassment.** With regard to physical harassment, over a third of LGBTQ students (34.2%) had been physically harassed (e.g., shoved or pushed) at some point at school during the past year based on their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender. Students most commonly reported being physically harassed at school based on their sexual orientation, followed by gender expression and gender (see Figure 1.16):<sup>38</sup>

- Approximately a quarter of LGBTQ students (25.7%) were physically harassed at school in the past year based on their sexual orientation; 5.4% experienced this harassment often or frequently;
- More than a fifth of LGBTQ students (21.8%) were physically harassed at school in the past year based on their gender expression;

**Figure 1.16 Frequency of Physical Harassment Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender, and Gender Expression Experienced by LGBTQ Students in the Past School Year**



5.3% experienced this harassment often or frequently; and

- Over a fifth of LGBTQ students (22.2%) were physically harassed at school in the past year based on their gender; 5.1% experienced this harassment often or frequently.

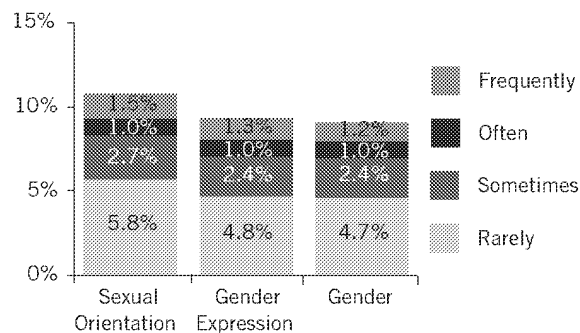
**Physical assault.** LGBTQ students were less likely to report experiencing physical assault (e.g., being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) at school than verbal or physical harassment,<sup>39</sup> which is not surprising given the more severe nature of assault. Nonetheless, 14.8% of students in our survey were assaulted at school during the past year based on their sexual orientation, gender, or gender expression. As we found with physical harassment, LGBTQ students most commonly experienced physical assault based on their sexual orientation, followed by assault based on gender expression and gender (see Figure 1.17):<sup>40</sup>

- 11.0% of LGBTQ students were physically assaulted at school in the past year based on their sexual orientation;
- 9.5% of LGBTQ students were physically assaulted at school in the past year based on how they expressed their gender; and
- 9.3% of LGBTQ students were physically assaulted at school in the past year school based on their gender.

### ***Harassment and Assault Based on Other Characteristics***

Although harassment based on gender and sexuality may be the most salient type of victimization

**Figure 1.17 Frequency of Physical Assault Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender, and Gender Expression Experienced by LGBTQ Students in the Past School Year**



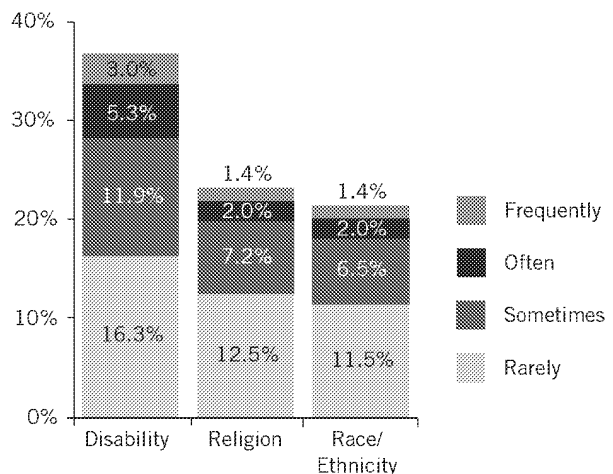
**“As soon as I came out, I was actively tormented and bullied by the popular boys and sexually harassed by them as well.”**

for many LGBTQ students, students also may be victimized for other reasons, given that LGBTQ students, like all people, hold multiple identities. We also asked LGBTQ students about their experiences with harassment related to other identity-based characteristics, including their religion, their actual or perceived race or ethnicity, and an actual or perceived emotional, developmental, or physical disability. As shown in Figure 1.18, over a third of LGBTQ students were harassed at school based on their actual or perceived disability (36.5%), and more than one in five reported being harassed at school based on their religion (23.1%) and actual or perceived race or ethnicity (21.4%).

### ***Other Types of Harassment and Negative Events***

LGBTQ students may be harassed or experience other negative events at school for reasons that are not clearly related to their gender, sexuality, or other identities. In our survey, we also asked students how often they experienced these other types of events in the past year, such as sexual harassment and deliberate property damage.

**Figure 1.18 Frequency of Other Identity-Based Harassment and Assault Experienced by LGBTQ Students in the Past School Year**





**Sexual harassment.** Survey participants were asked how often they had experienced sexual harassment at school in the past year, such as unwanted touching or sexual remarks directed at them. As shown in Figure 1.19, a majority of LGBTQ students (58.3%) had been sexually harassed at school, and 13.4% reported that such events occurred often or frequently.

**Relational aggression.** Research on school-based bullying and harassment often focuses on physical or overt acts of aggressive behavior; however, it is also important to examine relational forms of aggression that can damage peer relationships, such as spreading rumors or excluding students from peer activities.<sup>41</sup> We asked participants how often they had experienced two common forms of relational aggression: being purposefully excluded by peers and being the target of mean rumors or lies. As illustrated in Figure 1.19, the vast majority of LGBTQ students (90.1%) in our survey reported that they had felt deliberately excluded or “left out” by other students, and nearly half (47.5%) experienced this often or frequently. Most LGBTQ students (73.6%) had mean rumors or lies told about them at school, and over a quarter (25.2%) experienced this often or frequently.

#### **Electronic harassment or “cyberbullying.”**

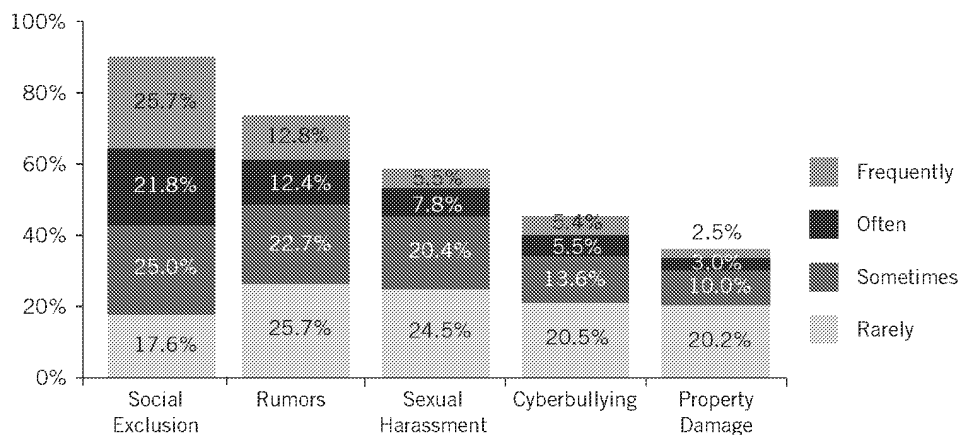
Electronic harassment (often called “cyberbullying”) is using an electronic medium, such as a mobile phone or the Internet, to threaten or harm others.<sup>42</sup> We asked students in our survey how often they were harassed or threatened by

students at their school via electronic media (for example, text messages, emails, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Snapchat), and over two-fifths of LGBTQ students (44.9%) reported experiencing this type of harassment in the past year, with 10.8% reporting that they experienced it often or frequently (see also Figure 1.19).

**Property theft or damage at school.** Having one’s personal property damaged or stolen is yet another dimension of a hostile school climate for students. Over a third of LGBTQ students (35.7%) reported that their property had been stolen or purposefully damaged by other students at school in the past year, and 5.5% said that such events had occurred often or frequently (see Figure 1.19).

In this section, we found that the vast majority of LGBTQ students experienced identity-based harassment at school, most-often targeting their LGBTQ identities. We also found that, in addition to verbal and physical harassment and assault, LGBTQ students faced other forms of harassment, such as relational aggression and sexual harassment. Although we do not know the degree to which these other forms of harassment target students’ LGBTQ identities, it is likely that LGBTQ youth face these forms of peer victimization more frequently than their non-LGBTQ peers. These forms of victimization can have serious consequences on students’ academic outcomes and well-being, and we examine these relationships for LGBTQ students later in this report.

**Figure 1.19 Frequency of Other Types of Harassment Experienced by LGBTQ Students in the Past School Year**





# Reporting of School-Based Harassment and Assault

## Key Findings

- The majority of LGBTQ students who were harassed or assaulted at school did not report these incidents to school staff.
- The most common reasons that LGBTQ students did not report incidents of victimization to school staff were doubts that effective intervention would occur, and fears that reporting would make the situation worse.
- When asked to describe how staff responded to reports of victimization, LGBTQ students most commonly said that staff did nothing or told the student to ignore it; 2 in 10 students were told to change their behavior (e.g., to not act “so gay” or dress in a certain way)
- Just over a quarter of LGBTQ students who had reported incidents of victimization to school staff said that staff had effectively addressed the problem.



GLSEN advocates that anti-bullying/harassment measures in school must include clear processes for reporting by both students and staff, and stipulations that staff are adequately trained to effectively address instances of bullying and harassment when informed about them. In our survey, we asked those students who had experienced harassment or assault in the past school year how often they had reported the incidents to school staff. Given that family members may be able to advocate on behalf of the student with school personnel, we further asked students in our survey if they reported harassment or assault to a family member (i.e., to a parent, guardian, or other family member), and if family members intervened on their behalf with the school.

As shown in Figure 1.20, over half of these students (56.6%) never reported incidents of victimization to school staff, and less than a fifth of students (16.7%) indicated that they reported these incidents to staff regularly (i.e., reporting “most of the time” or “always”). Less than half of students (44.9%) said that they had ever told a family member about the victimization they faced at school (see also Figure 1.20), and of those who had, only half (51.9%) reported that a family member had ever addressed the issue with school staff (see Figure 1.21). Although more research is needed to understand why LGBTQ students do not inform their families about school victimization, we posit that one reason may be related to whether or not they are out to a parent or guardian. We, indeed, found that students who were out as LGBTQ to at least one parent or guardian

were more likely to tell their families about the victimization they were experiencing in school (52.3% vs. 28.1%).<sup>43</sup>

### ***Reasons for Not Reporting Harassment or Assault***

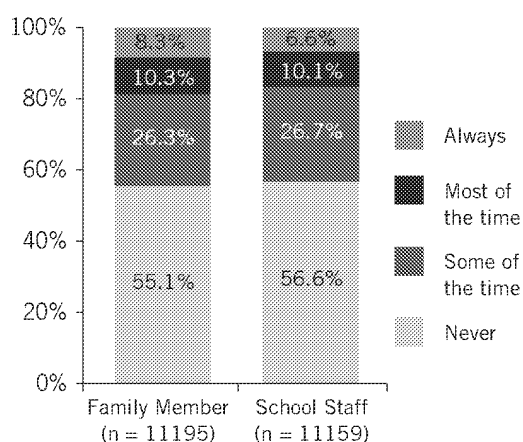
Reporting incidents of harassment and assault to school staff may be an intimidating task for students, especially when there is no guarantee that reporting these incidents will result in effective intervention. Students who indicated that they had not always told school personnel about their experiences with harassment or assault were asked why they did not do so. Table 1.1 shows the frequencies for the reasons given by survey respondents for not reporting.

#### **Doubted that effective intervention would occur.**

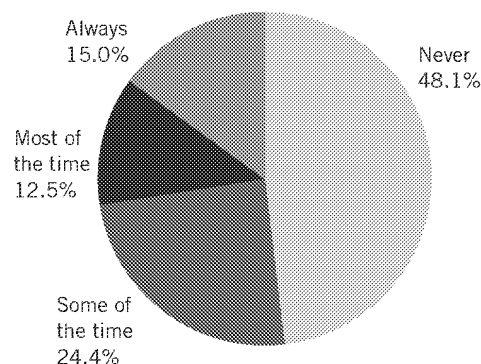
As shown in Table 1.1, the most common reasons that LGBTQ students cited for not always reporting incidents of victimization to school staff were related to doubt that doing so would be effective. Almost three-fourths of victimized students in our survey (72.7%) expressed the belief that school staff would not do anything about the harassment even if they reported it. In addition, about two-thirds of students (65.8%) believed that even if staff did do something, their actions would not effectively address the victimization that they were experiencing.

**Feared making the situation worse.** Many LGBTQ students indicated that they did not report instances of victimization because they were afraid of exacerbating an already hostile situation. For example, nearly two-thirds of these students (63.0%) indicated they wanted to avoid being

**Figure 1.20 Frequency of LGBTQ Students Reporting Incidents of Harassment and Assault**



**Figure 1.21 Frequency of Intervention by LGBTQ Students' Family Members (n = 5020)**





labeled a “snitch” or “tattle-tale.” Furthermore, many students did not report their harassment or assault to school staff due to concerns about confidentiality. Specifically, approximately two-fifths of LGBTQ students in our survey (43.5%) were worried about being “outed” to school staff or to their family members simply by reporting the bias-based bullying that they were experiencing. Lastly, just over two-fifths of students (41.6%) expressed explicit safety concerns, such as fear of retaliation from the perpetrator if they reported the harassment to school staff.

#### **Concerns about approaching school staff.**

Many LGBTQ students reported that they were uncomfortable approaching school staff. About half of students said they felt too embarrassed or ashamed to report the incident to school staff members (49.5%), and also about half (48.4%) felt they might be blamed and/or disciplined by school staff simply for reporting the incident. In addition, more than a quarter of students (27.7%) were deterred from reporting harassment or assault because they felt that staff members at their school were homophobic or transphobic themselves. Such staff may not fully grasp the victimization LGBTQ

students experience, or may simply choose not to help. Perhaps the most troubling, however, is that nearly one-tenth of victimized students in our survey (8.5%) said that school staff members were actually part of the harassment or assault they were experiencing, thus leaving students to feel that there is no recourse for addressing incidents of victimization at their school.

Staff themselves perpetrating victimization against LGBTQ students is troubling in and of itself, but also can exacerbate the negative school climate that many LGBTQ students often experience. Harassment by school staff can cause additional harm when witnessed by other students by sending a message that harassment is acceptable in the classroom or within the school community. Harassment of students by staff also serves as a reminder that safer school efforts must address all members of the school community, and not just the student body.

#### **Did not think harassment was serious enough.**

Nearly half of students (48.3%) expressed that they did not report incidents of victimization to school personnel because they did not consider

**Table 1.1 Reasons LGBTQ Students Did Not Always Report Incidents of Harassment or Assault to School Staff (n = 10406)**

| Students Reporting Specific Response*   | %     | number |
|---|-------|--------|
| <b>Doubted that Effective Intervention Would Occur</b>  |       |        |
| Did Not Think School Staff Would Do Anything About It   | 72.7% | 7560   |
| Did Not Think School Staff's Handling of the Situation Would Be Effective                                     | 65.8% | 6843   |
| <b>Feared Making the Situation Worse</b>  |       |        |
| Did Not Want to be Perceived as a “Snitch” or a “Tattle Tale”   | 63.0% | 6560   |
| Did Not Want to be “Outed” as Being LGBTQ to Staff or Family Members  | 43.5% | 4526   |
| Was Concerned for Their Safety (e.g., retaliation, violence from perpetrator)                                 | 41.6% | 4330   |
| <b>Concerns about Approaching School Staff</b>  |       |        |
| Was Too Embarrassed or Ashamed to Report It   | 49.5% | 5156   |
| Fear of Being Blamed or Getting in Trouble for the Harassment   | 48.4% | 5032   |
| Homophobic/Transphobic School Staff   | 27.7% | 2878   |
| School Staff Were Part of the Harassment  | 8.5%  | 882    |
| <b>Did Not Think the Harassment was Serious Enough</b>  | 48.3% | 5030   |
| <b>Student Handled It Themselves</b>  | 25.3% | 2629   |
| <b>Other Reason</b> (e.g., reported incident to friends or family instead, did not want perpetrator punished) | 1.1%  | 110    |

\*Because respondents could select multiple responses, categories are not mutually exclusive. Percentages may not add up to 100%.

**“I got rocks thrown at me and was beaten by kids at my school. I never told anyone about this. Not a parent, school staff member, nor peer.”**

the harassment to be serious enough to report. Because we lack specific details about these particular incidents of victimization, we cannot determine whether the events perceived as “not serious enough” to report were truly minor. We, nevertheless, did find that students who said they did not report victimization because it was “not that serious” had lower levels of victimization compared to those who did not cite this reason for not reporting harassment or assault.<sup>44</sup> However, it is also possible that some students may convince themselves that their harassment is insignificant, and therefore not worth reporting, due to the many other inhibiting factors discussed throughout this section.

**Students handled it themselves.** A quarter of students (25.3%) in our survey said they did not report harassment or assault to school staff because they handled the situation themselves. Without further information, we cannot know what specific actions these students took to address these incidents. It may be that they confronted the perpetrator directly, either instructing them to stop, or they retaliated in some way. However, it is a concern because such actions could put the victimized students at risk for disciplinary consequences and may not prevent further peer victimization. Further research is needed to explore the nature and possible consequences of the various ways that students handle incidents of harassment themselves.

Taken together, these responses demonstrate a pervasive problem in our nation’s schools. It is clear that LGBTQ youth are not able to report experiences of harassment and/or assault in their schools, whether due to doubts about school staff taking effective action, fear of retaliation from perpetrators, concerns about being “outed” as LGBTQ, or by simply being too embarrassed to come forward and report the victimization they are experiencing. In order to create a safe learning environment for all students, schools should work

toward appropriately and effectively responding to incidents of victimization. Many of the reasons students gave for not reporting victimization could be addressed through more intentional school policies and practices. School staff should respond to each incident brought to their attention, as well as inform victims of the action that was taken. Training all members of the school community to be sensitive to LGBTQ student issues and effectively respond to bullying and harassment, in addition to doing away with zero-tolerance policies that lead to automatic discipline of targets of harassment and assault, could increase the likelihood of reporting by students who are victimized at school. Such efforts could, in turn, improve school climate for all students.

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### ***Students’ Reports on the Nature of School Staff’s Responses to Harassment and Assault***

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We asked those LGBTQ students who had reported incidents to school staff about the actions taken by staff in response to the most recent incident. As shown in Table 1.2, the most common responses were that the staff member:

- Did nothing and/or told the reporting student to ignore the victimization (60.5%);
- Talked to the perpetrator/told them to stop the harassment (43.1%);
- Provided emotional support to the reporting student (23.1%); and
- Told the reporting student to change their behavior (e.g., not to act “so gay” or not to dress a certain way — 20.8%).

Formal disciplinary action to address reported incidents of victimization occurred less frequently—less than one-fifth of students who had reported harassment (14.9%) indicated that the perpetrator had been disciplined by school staff. Unfortunately, formal disciplinary action was sometimes directed at the target of the harassment themselves. Nearly one in ten students (7.3%) reported that they themselves were disciplined when they reported being victimized (see also Table 1.2).

Failing to intervene when harassment is reported, punishing students for their own victimization, and other inappropriate responses to reports of harassment and assault are unacceptable and



| <b>Table 1.2 LGBTQ Students' Reports of School Staff's Responses to Reports of Harassment and Assault<br/>(n = 4841)</b> |              |             |
|--|--------------|-------------|
| <b>Students Reporting Specific Response*</b>   | <b>%</b>     | <b>n</b>    |
| <b>Staff Did Nothing/Took No Action and/or Told the Student to Ignore It</b>   | <b>60.5%</b> | <b>2930</b> |
| Staff told the student to ignore it  | 45.2%        | 2186        |
| Staff did nothing/Took no action   | 43.2%        | 2092        |
| <b>Staff Talked to Perpetrator/Told Perpetrator to Stop</b>  | <b>43.1%</b> | <b>2085</b> |
| <b>Provided Them Emotional Support</b>   | <b>23.1%</b> | <b>1120</b> |
| <b>Parents were Contacted</b>  | <b>21.5%</b> | <b>1040</b> |
| Staff contacted the reporting student's parents  | 15.8%        | 766         |
| Staff contacted the perpetrator's parents  | 11.9%        | 576         |
| <b>Told Reporting Student to Change Their Behavior (e.g., to not act "so gay" or dress in a certain way)</b>             | <b>20.8%</b> | <b>1006</b> |
| <b>Reporting Student and Perpetrator were Separated from Each Other</b>  | <b>17.7%</b> | <b>857</b>  |
| <b>Perpetrator was Disciplined (e.g., with detention, suspension)</b>  | <b>14.9%</b> | <b>719</b>  |
| <b>Incident was Referred to Another Staff Person</b>   | <b>16.5%</b> | <b>799</b>  |
| <b>Filed a Report of the Incident</b>  | <b>15.2%</b> | <b>734</b>  |
| <b>Staff Attempted to Educate Students about Bullying</b>  | <b>11.3%</b> | <b>549</b>  |
| Staff educated the perpetrator about bullying  | 7.4%         | 356         |
| Staff educated the whole class or school about bullying  | 5.9%         | 284         |
| <b>Used Peer Mediation or Conflict Resolution Approach</b>   | <b>6.5%</b>  | <b>317</b>  |
| <b>Reporting Student was Disciplined (e.g., with detention, suspension)</b>  | <b>7.3%</b>  | <b>351</b>  |
| <b>Other Responses (e.g., staff counseled student, victim was blamed, threats of discipline)</b>                         | <b>1.8%</b>  | <b>86</b>   |



potentially harmful to students who experience them. Staff members who do not address reports of student victimization not only fail to help the victimized student, but also may discourage other students from reporting when they are harassed or assaulted at school.

### ***Effectiveness of Staff Responses to Harassment and Assault***

In our survey, students who said that they reported incidents of harassment and assault to school staff were also asked how effective staff members were in addressing the problem.<sup>45</sup> As shown in Figure 1.22, just over a quarter of students (28.0%) believed that staff responded effectively to their reports of victimization. The staff actions that students were more likely to indicate as effective included:<sup>46</sup>

- Staff took disciplinary action against the perpetrator;
- Staff educated the perpetrator about bullying;
- Staff contacted the perpetrator's parents; and
- Staff provided emotional support.

The responses that students were more likely to indicate were less effective were:<sup>47</sup>

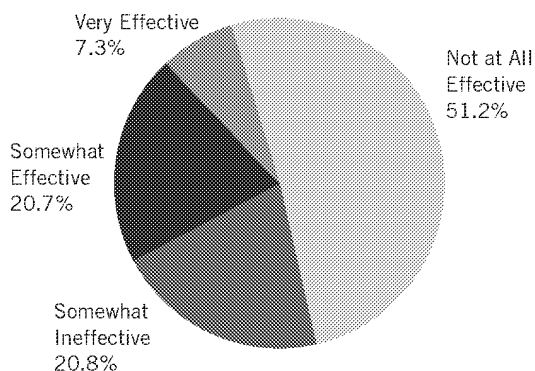
- Staff told the reporting student to change their behavior;
- Staff disciplined the student who reported the incident;

- Staff did nothing to address the incident and/or told the reporting student to ignore the harassment;
- Staff talked to the perpetrator/told the perpetrator to stop;
- Staff filed a report;
- Staff referred the incident to another staff member;
- Staff contacted the reporting student's parents;
- Staff used a peer mediation/conflict resolution approach;
- Staff educated the class or student body about bullying; and
- Staff separated the perpetrator and reporting student.

Although these findings about ineffective responses may suggest a lack of care on the part of staff, they may also be indicative of school staff who are well-meaning but are also misinformed about effective intervention strategies for cases of bullying and harassment. For example, peer mediation and conflict resolution strategies, in which students speak to each other about an incident, are only effective in situations where conflict is among students with equal social power. Peer mediation that emphasizes that all involved parties contribute to conflict can be ineffective, and, at worst, may re-victimize the targeted student when there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. When harassment is bias-based, as is the case with anti-LGBTQ harassment, there is almost always, by definition, an imbalance of power.<sup>48</sup>

School personnel are charged with providing a safe learning environment for all students. In this survey, the most common reason students gave for not reporting harassment or assault was the belief that nothing would be done by school staff. And as discussed above, even when students *did* report incidents of victimization, the most common staff responses were to do nothing or merely to tell the student to ignore it. By not effectively addressing harassment and assault, students who are victimized are denied an adequate opportunity to learn. It is particularly troubling that one-fifth of victimized students (20.8%) were told by school

**Figure 1.22 LGBTQ Students' Perceptions of Effectiveness of Reporting Incidents of Harassment and Assault to School Staff**



staff to change their behavior for reasons such as their sexual orientation or gender expression (see Table 1.2), which implies that they somehow brought the problem upon themselves for simply being who they are. It is even more concerning that this type of response — that an LGBTQ identity is the actual problem — aligns with the notion of conversion therapy, a practice that claims to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, which can lead to lowered psychological well-being among other issues for LGBTQ youth.<sup>49</sup> Although this practice has been widely discredited by mainstream medical and mental health organizations, some practitioners continue to administer conversion therapy in the U.S. This type of response by school staff may exacerbate an already hostile school climate for LGBTQ students, and may deter students from reporting other incidents of harassment or assault in the future.

When students reported incidents of harassment or assault to staff members, the interventions had varying degrees of perceived effectiveness. The findings suggest that direct actions taken by school staff were more likely seen as effective, such as teaching the perpetrator about bullying. In contrast, indirect actions that are not as visible and immediate to the student, such as teaching the class or student body about bullying, filing a report, or referring to another staff person, were more likely to be seen as ineffective. One interesting exception, however, was that talking to the perpetrator or telling the perpetrator to stop, a direct action, was less likely to be seen as an effective response, yet taking disciplinary action against the perpetrator and teaching the perpetrator about bullying were more likely to be seen as effective responses. It may be that talking to the perpetrator or telling the perpetrator to stop was a simple, momentary reprimand without any further action that would have stopped future incidents. In contrast, taking disciplinary action against the perpetrator and teaching the perpetrator about bullying connote more substantial actions that could prevent future incidents, than talking to the perpetrator or telling

them to stop. Separating the student was also not an effective intervention. Although this type of intervention may be a near-term solution to the problem, it does not necessarily address the root of the problem and may not be an effective long-term solution. Finally, peer mediation was not an effective response because, as discussed earlier in this section, the LGBTQ student may be re-victimized due to the imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim.

Given that we do not know the circumstances for each instance of harassment or assault, or the reasons why students would characterize a response as effective or not, we are not able to know details about what made certain staff responses (e.g., talking to the perpetrator) more effective than others (i.e., whether it resulted in an end to the harassment and/or made the student feel more supported in school). As discussed, it may be that actions taken by school staff that are directed at the perpetrator and actions that have negative consequences for the perpetrator are seen as more effective intervention strategies than actions that are not directed at the perpetrator or that do not have consequences. Disciplining the perpetrator, contacting the perpetrator's parents, and educating the perpetrator about bullying may be more likely to change their behavior than simply talking to the perpetrator or telling the perpetrator to stop, and educating the class or student body about bullying. Our prior research has indicated that general training about bullying and harassment may not be enough to equip educators with the ability to effectively address anti-LGBTQ victimization.<sup>50</sup> School or district-wide educator professional development trainings on issues specifically related to LGBTQ students and bias-based bullying and harassment may better equip educators with tools for effectively intervening in cases of bullying of LGBTQ students. In addition, such trainings may help educators become more aware of the experiences of LGBTQ students, including incidents of harassment and bullying, which could play a vital role in improving LGBTQ students' school experiences overall.





# Experiences of Discrimination at School

## Key Findings

- Approximately 6 in 10 LGBTQ students indicated that they had experienced LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies and practices at their school.
- Students were commonly restricted from expressing themselves as LGBTQ at school, including being: disciplined for public displays of affection that are not disciplined among non-LGBTQ students, prevented from discussing or writing about LGBTQ topics in assignments, restricted from wearing clothing or items supporting LGBTQ issues, prohibited from bringing a date of the same gender to a school dance, and being disciplined unfairly simply because they were LGBTQ.
- Schools often limited the inclusion of LGBTQ topics or ideas in extracurricular activities, including: preventing LGBTQ students from using locker rooms aligned with their gender identity, preventing or discouraging students from participating in school sports because they were LGBTQ, preventing students from discussing or writing about LGBTQ issues in extracurricular activities, and inhibiting GSAs' activities.
- Schools often enforced adherence to traditional gender norms, including being: prevented from using bathrooms aligned with their gender identity, prevented from using their chosen name or pronouns, and prevented from wearing clothes considered "inappropriate" based on gender.
- Students commonly experienced gender separation practices at school, including homecoming court or prom royalty, attire for graduation, and attire for official school photographs.



Hearing homophobic language and negative remarks about gender expression in the hallways and directly experiencing victimization from other students clearly contribute to a hostile climate for LGBTQ students. Certain school policies and practices may also contribute to negative experiences for LGBTQ students and make them feel as if they are not valued by their school communities. In our survey, we asked students about a number of specific LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies and practices at their school that they may have personally experienced. Nearly 6 in 10 students (59.1%) indicated that they had experienced any of these LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies and practices (see Figure 1.23).

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### ***Restricting LGBTQ Expression in School***

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Several of the questions about policies and practices were related to efforts to restrict students from identifying as LGBTQ, from being themselves in the school environment, and from expressing support for or interest in LGBTQ issues. Not only do these policies stifle students' expression, but they also serve to maintain a silence around LGBTQ people and issues that could have the effect of further stigmatizing LGBTQ people. As shown in Figure 1.23, over a quarter of LGBTQ students (28.0%) said that they had been disciplined for public affection, such as kissing or holding hands, that is not similarly disciplined among non-LGBTQ students. Additionally, 16.6% of LGBTQ students said that they had been prevented from including LGBTQ topics in class assignments and projects, or discussing LGBTQ topics in class. One in ten LGBTQ students (10.7%) indicated that their schools had prevented them from wearing clothing or items supporting LGBTQ issues (e.g., a t-shirt with a rainbow flag), and 7.6% had been prevented from attending dances with someone of the same gender. Finally, 3.0% of students reported that they had been disciplined simply for identifying as LGBTQ.

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### ***Limiting LGBTQ Inclusion in Extracurricular Activities***

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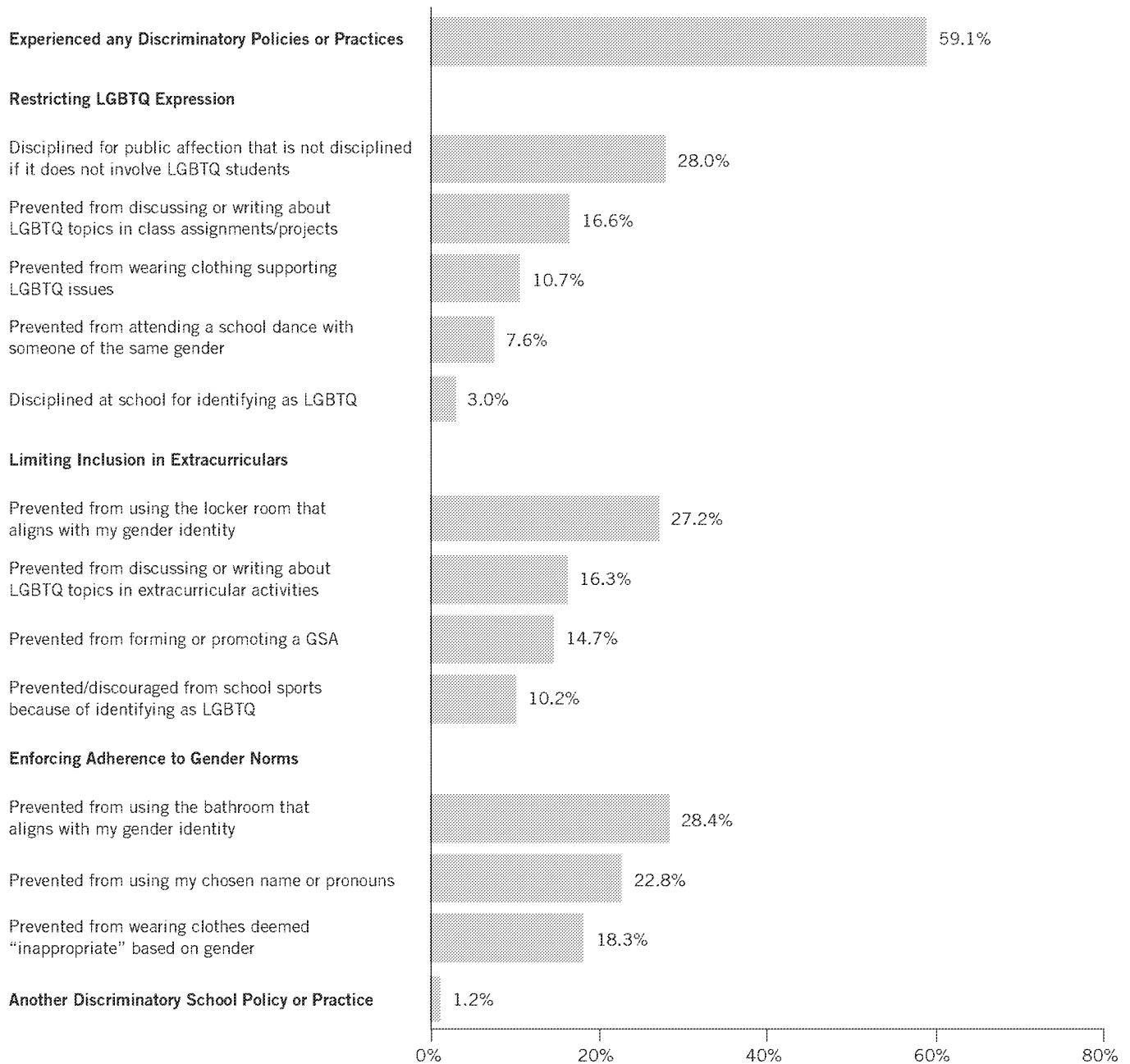
Students in our survey indicated that some schools also maintained policies and practices that limited

LGBTQ content in extracurricular activities and/or restricted LGBTQ students' participation in these activities. For example, 16.3% of LGBTQ students said that their school prevented them from discussing or writing about LGBTQ issues in extracurricular activities, such as the yearbook, school newspaper, or events like Day of Silence.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, 14.7% reported that they had been hindered in forming or promoting a GSA or similar school club supportive of LGBTQ issues (see also Figure 1.23).

LGBTQ students in our survey also reported discriminatory experiences with regard to school athletics. Approximately one-tenth of students (10.2%) indicated that school staff or coaches had prevented or discouraged them from playing sports because they were LGBTQ. LGBTQ students may also be indirectly discouraged from participating in sports if they are unable to use the locker rooms aligned with their gender identity. For example, transgender and nonbinary students may be required to use the locker room of their assigned sex, and other LGBTQ students may be prevented from using gendered locker rooms based on their same-sex attraction (e.g., staff preventing a lesbian girl from using the girl's locker room because she is a lesbian). We found that 27.2% of LGBTQ students were prevented from using locker rooms aligned with their gender identity. Further, we found that LGBTQ students who experienced this locker room discrimination were less likely to participate in school sports, and were more likely to avoid gym class, sports fields, and locker rooms at school.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, some schools are sending the message that LGBTQ topics are not appropriate for extracurricular activities, and in some cases, that LGBTQ people should not be allowed to participate. Discriminatory policies and practices that mark official school activities as distinctly non-LGBTQ prevent LGBTQ students from participating in the school community as fully and completely as other students.

**“More than one teacher did not allow me to hold hands with my girlfriend and threatened detention if they even saw us in the halls holding hands.”**

**Figure 1.23 Percentage of LGBTQ Students Who Have Experienced Discriminatory Policies and Practices at School**



### ***Enforcing Adherence to Traditional Gender Norms***

Other discriminatory policies appeared to target students' gender by prescribing certain rules or practices that limited their gender expression or access to gendered facilities (see Figure 1.23). Nearly a quarter of LGBTQ students (22.8%) said that they had been prevented from using their chosen name or pronouns in school, and nearly a fifth of students (18.3%) reported that their school prevented them from wearing clothing deemed "inappropriate" based on their gender (e.g., a student prevented from wearing a dress because they are a boy, or because staff think they are a boy). Additionally, over a quarter of LGBTQ students (28.4%) said that they had been prevented from using the bathroom aligned with their gender. Policies and practices that restrict bathroom access may have a particularly damaging impact on LGBTQ youth, including physical health complications if students are forced to avoid using the bathroom during the school day.<sup>53</sup> In fact, we found that LGBTQ students were approximately twice as likely to avoid the bathroom at school if they experienced bathroom discrimination (71.8% vs. 34.6%).<sup>54</sup>

It is important to note that each of these gender-related discriminatory policies and practices, including the discriminatory locker room policies mentioned previously, explicitly target students' gender identity and expression, and thus, may

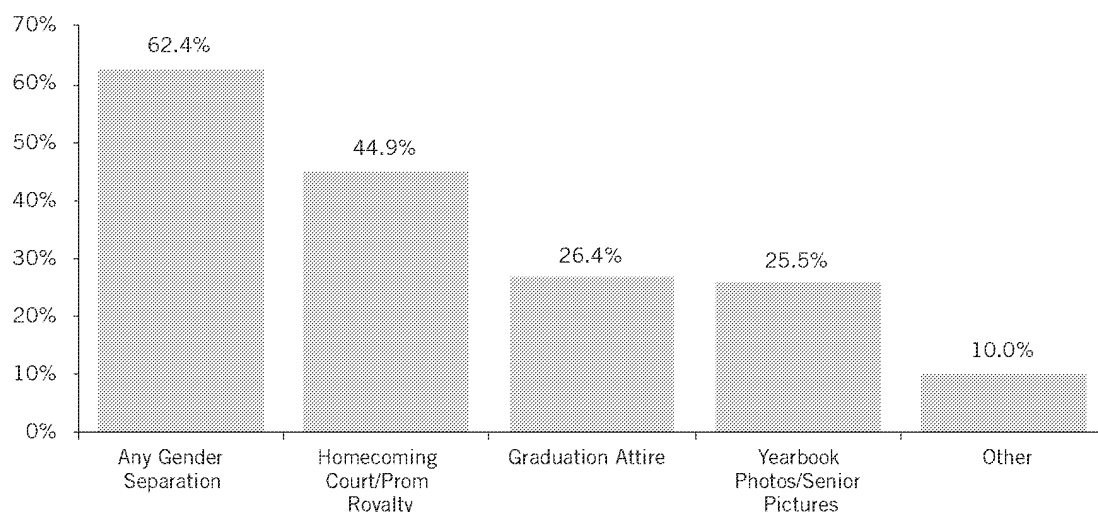
uniquely impact transgender and nonbinary students. For further discussion on the experiences of transgender and nonbinary students and their experiences with discriminatory policies and practices at school, see the "School Climate and Gender" section of this report.

### ***Gender Separation in School***

School policies and practices that separate students by gender or impose different standards and expectations based on gender may pose distinct challenges for transgender and nonbinary students. Depending on how these practices are enforced, students may be forced to group with others based on their legal sex, regardless of their gender identity. These practices may also place undue pressure on transgender and nonbinary students to disclose their transgender status before they are ready in order to advocate for their right to be grouped in a way that affirms their gender identity. As these practices reinforce the gender binary (i.e., the notion that there are only two distinct and opposite genders) by separating boys from girls, they create an environment that may be uniquely difficult to navigate for nonbinary students. When gendered spaces, activities, and rules provide no options for students who do not conform to a gender binary, these students may feel as if they have no place in school at all.

Previously in this section, we discussed discriminatory practices in sports participation,

**Figure 1.24 LGBTQ Students' Reports of Ways Schools Separate Activities by Gender or Have Different Requirements Based on Gender**  
(Percentage of LGBTQ Students in Co-ed Schools, n = 16497)



and access to bathrooms and locker rooms. In addition to these gendered spaces, we asked LGBTQ students about other specific practices that separate students by gender in school or require different standards for students based on gender. As seen in Figure 1.24, the majority of LGBTQ students (62.4%) experienced gendered spaces or practices at school.<sup>55</sup> Nearly half of LGBTQ students (44.9%) reported that their school had gender-specified homecoming courts, prom kings/queens, or other types of honors at dances. These practices not only reinforce the gender binary, but by selecting a “king” and a “queen,” also enforce the idea that heterosexuality is the norm and the only acceptable way of being. In addition, just over one-fourth of students (26.4%) reported that their school required gendered attire for graduation, such as different-colored robes for boys and girls, and 25.5% reported gendered attire for official school photographs, such as having boys wear tuxedos and girls wear dresses for senior portraits (see also Figure 1.24).

We also provided an opportunity for students to indicate additional ways that their school separated student activities by gender, and 10.0% reported other types of gender separation. Students most

commonly reported practices related to orchestra, band, chorus, and dance performances (e.g., different dress requirements, separation of boys and girls), as well as school uniforms and dress codes (e.g., having different dress codes or uniforms for boys and girls, or differential enforcement of dress code based on gender). A number of students also discussed special events or classroom activities that pitted boys against girls.

Our findings indicate that anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices are all too pervasive in our nation’s schools. In order to ensure that schools are welcoming and affirming of all students, staff and administration should eliminate policies and practices that treat LGBTQ couples differently, censor expressions of LGBTQ identities, enforce traditional gender norms, needlessly separate students by gender, or maintain different rules or standards for boys and girls. Ending these practices can help to provide LGBTQ youth with a more inclusive school experience. Later in this report, we discuss the negative effects of these discriminatory policies and practices on LGBTQ students’ well-being and academic outcomes.





# Hostile School Climate, Educational Outcomes, and Psychological Well-Being

## Key Findings

- LGBTQ students who experienced high levels of in-school victimization:
  - Had lower GPAs than other students;
  - Were less likely to plan to pursue any post-secondary education;
  - Were nearly three times as likely to have missed school in the past month because they felt unsafe;
  - Were more likely to have been disciplined at school;
  - Were less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their school community; and
  - Had lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression.
- LGBTQ students who experienced discrimination at school:
  - Had lower GPAs than other students;
  - Were nearly three times as likely to have missed school in the past month because they felt unsafe;
  - Were more likely to have been disciplined at school;
  - Were less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their school community; and
  - Had lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression.
- LGBTQ students who did not plan to graduate high school (e.g., who planned to drop out or were not sure if they would finish high school) most commonly reported mental health concerns, academic concerns, and hostile school climate as reasons for leaving school.



**“I love learning but most days i just hate school. i can’t deal with the comments and the inability for people to just be kind to LGBTQIA+ students.”**

### ***Educational Aspirations***

In order to examine the relationship between school climate and educational outcomes, we asked students about their aspirations with regard to further education, including their plans to complete high school and their highest level of expected educational attainment.

**High school completion.** As shown in Table 1.3, almost all LGBTQ students in our survey (96.5%) planned to graduate high school, and 3.5% of students indicated that they did not plan to complete high school or were not sure if they would. We also found that LGBTQ students in earlier grades were more likely than their older peers to indicate that they were unsure about their high school graduation plans.<sup>56</sup> Further, it is important to note that the 2019 NSCS only included students who were in school at some point during the 2018–2019 school year. Thus, this study sample includes some LGBTQ students who may not finish high school, but does not include youth who had already left school before the school year began.

We also asked LGBTQ students who did not plan on completing high school or who were not sure if they would graduate whether they planned to obtain a General Education Diploma (GED) or similar equivalent, and 65.7% indicated that they did. Some research on high school equivalency certification in the general student population suggests that GED equivalencies are not associated with the same educational attainment and earning potential as high school diplomas.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of students who planned to get a GED (59.4%) indicated that they intended to pursue some type of post-secondary education.<sup>58</sup> More research is needed to better understand how LGBTQ students’ educational and career plans may be impeded if they do not graduate from high school.

**Reasons LGBTQ students may not finish high school.** To better understand why LGBTQ students might not finish high school, we asked those students who indicated they were not planning on completing high school or were not sure if they would graduate about their reasons for leaving school. Most of these students cited multiple reasons for potentially not graduating. As shown in Table 1.4, the most common reason concerned mental health, such as depression, anxiety, or stress (92.7% of those who provided reasons for leaving high school), followed by academic issues (68.4%), including poor grades, high number of absences, or not having enough credits to graduate, and then a hostile school climate (60.8%), including issues with harassment, unsupportive peers or educators, and gendered school policies/practices, such as restrictions on which bathroom they are allowed to use.<sup>59</sup>

**Table 1.3 LGBTQ Students’ High School Completion Plans**

| High School Graduation Plans                               |       | % of All Students  |
|--|-------|--|
| Plan to Graduate HS  |       | 96.5%  |
| Do Not Plan to Graduate HS or Not Sure if Will Graduate HS |       | 3.5%   |
| Do not plan to graduate                                    |       | 0.7%   |
| Unsure if will graduate                                    |       | 2.8%   |
| Plans to Receive GED or Equivalent                         |       |  |
|  |       | % of Students Not Planning to Graduate or Not Sure (n = 589) |
| Do not plan to obtain a GED or equivalent                  | 34.3% | 1.2%   |
| Plan to obtain a GED or equivalent                         | 65.7% | 2.3%   |

\*Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

LGBTQ students may consider leaving school for many reasons, some of which may have little to do with their sexual orientation, gender identity, or peer victimization — as noted above. However, it is also possible that some of the mental health and academic concerns that students reported were caused by experiences of a hostile school environment, as noted later in this section. For example, school-based victimization may impact students' mental health,<sup>60</sup> and this lower psychological well-being may also place students at risk for lower academic achievement.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, a lack of safety may lead to students missing school, which can result in a student being pushed out of school by school disciplinary or criminal sanctions for truancy,<sup>62</sup> dropping out of school as a result of poor academic achievement, or disengaging with school due to the days missed. Indeed, we found that among students in our survey, missing school due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable was related to increased likelihood of not planning to complete high school.<sup>63</sup> Future research should examine the potentially interconnected mechanisms that lead LGBTQ students to leave high school before graduating.

**Post-secondary aspirations.** When asked about their aspirations with regard to post-secondary education, only 7.2% of LGBTQ students indicated that they did *not* plan to pursue any type of post-secondary education (i.e., that they only planned to obtain a high school diploma, did not plan to finish high school, or were unsure of their plans). Just over two-fifths of students (43.0%) said that they planned to complete their education with a Bachelor's degree (see Figure 1.25) and another two-fifths of students (39.1%) reported that they planned to continue on to obtain a graduate degree (e.g., Master's degree, PhD, MD).

### ***School Climate and Educational Aspirations***

Students who experience victimization in school may respond by avoiding the harassment, perhaps by dropping out of school or avoiding any further type of formal educational environments, such as college. We assessed the relationship between school victimization<sup>64</sup> and educational aspirations for students in our survey and found that LGBTQ students who reported higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender

**Table 1.4 Reasons LGBTQ Students Do Not Plan to Graduate High School or Are Unsure If They Will Graduate (n = 632)**

|  | % of Students Reporting*<br>(of students who indicated that they did not plan to graduate or were unsure) |
|--|---|
| <b>Mental Health Concerns</b><br>(e.g., depression, anxiety, stress) | <b>92.7%</b>  |
| <b>Academic Concerns (Any)</b>                                       | <b>68.4%</b>  |
| Poor Grades  | 57.4%   |
| Absences   | 39.2%   |
| Not Enough Credits   | 29.0%   |
| <b>Hostile School Climate (Any)</b>                                  | <b>60.8%</b>  |
| Unsupportive Peers   | 49.5%   |
| Harassment   | 42.2%   |
| Unsupportive Teachers/Staff  | 30.1%   |
| Gendered School Policies/Practices                                   | 30.1%   |
| <b>Future Plans Do Not Require HS Diploma</b>                        | <b>24.2%</b>  |
| <b>Family Responsibilities</b> (e.g., child care, wage earner)       | <b>15.5%</b>  |
| <b>Other</b> (e.g., lack of motivation, unsupportive family)         | <b>5.5%</b>   |

\*Because respondents could select multiple responses, categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages do not add up to 100%.



expression reported lower educational aspirations than LGBTQ students who reported lower levels of victimization.<sup>65</sup> For example, as shown in Figure 1.26, students who experienced a higher severity of victimization based on sexual orientation were less likely to plan to go on to college or to vocational or trade school, compared with those who had experienced less severe victimization (9.9% vs. 5.8%). Anti-LGBTQ discriminatory policies and practices were also related to lower educational aspirations for LGBTQ students in our survey – students who experienced this type of discrimination at school reported lower educational aspirations than those who did not experience discrimination.<sup>66</sup>

### ***School Climate and Academic Achievement***

As detailed previously in this section, a hostile school climate can lead LGBTQ students to not want to continue on with their education. However, it can also result in these students struggling academically. We found that more severe victimization was related to lower academic achievement among LGBTQ students. As shown in Table 1.5, the mean reported grade point averages (GPA) for students who had higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender expression was significantly lower than for students who experienced less harassment and assault.<sup>67</sup> For example, LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on gender expression reported an average GPA of 2.98 and LGBTQ students who experienced lower levels of this type of victimization reported an average GPA of 3.36 (see Table 1.5). As also

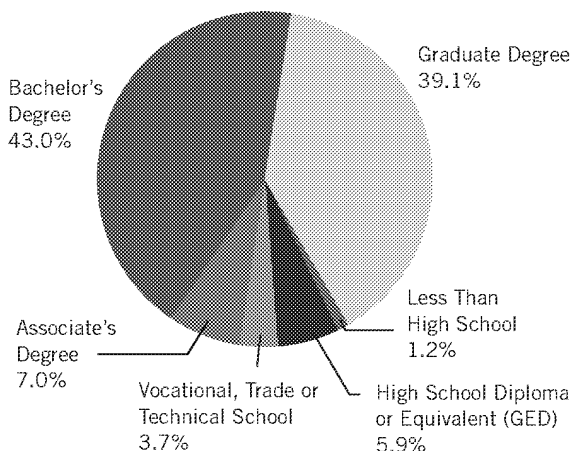
illustrated in Table 1.5, experiences of institutional discrimination were also related to lower educational achievement.<sup>68</sup>

Overall, the vast majority of LGBTQ students planned to complete high school as well as some form of post-secondary education, although experiences with anti-LGBTQ harassment and discrimination were both associated with lower educational aspirations as well as lower GPA. Thus, supporting LGBTQ students' future educational attainment requires focused efforts that reduce anti-LGBTQ bias in schools and create affirming academic environments. Further, these efforts must be implemented at all grade levels, with particular attention paid to younger students, who may be at greater risk for not completing high school.

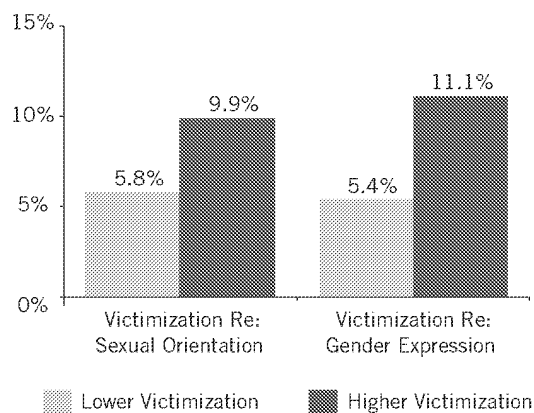
### ***Absenteeism***

School-based victimization can impinge on a student's right to an education. Students who are regularly harassed or assaulted in school may attempt to avoid these hurtful experiences by not attending school and, accordingly, may be more likely to miss school than students who do not experience such victimization. We found that experiences of harassment and assault were, in fact, related to missing days of school.<sup>69</sup> As shown in Figure 1.27 students were nearly three times as likely to have missed school in the past month if they had experienced higher levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation (57.2% vs. 21.7%) or gender expression (59.0% vs. 21.8%).

**Figure 1.25 Educational Aspirations of LGBTQ Students**



**Figure 1.26 Educational Aspirations and Severity of Victimization**  
(Percentage of LGBTQ Students Not Planning to Pursue Postsecondary Education)



In addition to victimization, we found that experiences of discrimination were related to missing days of school.<sup>70</sup> As also shown in Figure 1.27, LGBTQ students were almost three times as likely to have missed school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable if they had experienced LGBTQ-related discrimination in their school (44.1% vs. 16.4%).

As these findings indicate, both negative interpersonal experiences, such as victimization, as well as negative institutional treatment, such as anti-LGBTQ discriminatory policies and practices both contribute to a school setting that feels unwelcoming for many LGBTQ students. And as such, they restrict access to an LGBTQ student's education.

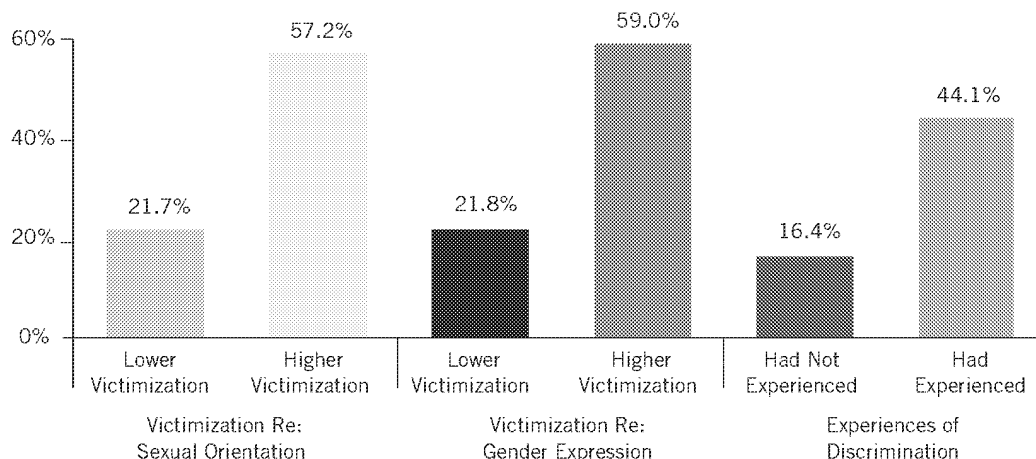
### ***School Climate and School Discipline***

The use of harsh and exclusionary discipline, such as zero tolerance policies, has proliferated over the previous several decades for both serious infractions as well as minor violations of school policies.<sup>71</sup> Initially framed as vital for protecting teachers and students,<sup>72</sup> these disciplinary policies are regarded by many as being over-employed in removing students from the traditional school environment.<sup>73</sup> The use of harsh discipline has contributed to higher dropout rates, as well as more youth in alternative educational settings and in juvenile justice facilities, where educational supports and opportunities may be less available.<sup>74</sup> Growing awareness of the soaring use of exclusionary school discipline approaches in the

**Table 1.5 Academic Achievement of LGBTQ Students by Experiences of Victimization and Discrimination**

|  | Mean Reported Grade Point Average |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Peer Victimization</b>  |                                   |
| Sexual Orientation   |                                   |
| Lower Victimization  | 3.34                              |
| Higher Victimization   | 3.03                              |
| Gender Expression  |                                   |
| Lower Victimization  | 3.36                              |
| Higher Victimization   | 2.98                              |
| <b>Experiences of Discrimination</b>                               |                                   |
| Had Not Experienced Discriminatory Policies or Practices at School | 3.39                              |
| Had Experienced Discriminatory Policies or Practices at School     | 3.14                              |

**Figure 1.27 Absenteeism by Experiences of Victimization and Discrimination**  
(Percentage of LGBTQ Students Who Missed at Least a Day of School in Past Month)



**“My last school I went to before I moved to my new one, expelled me for being a member of the LGBTQ community.”**

U.S. has included some attention to their effect on LGBTQ youth.<sup>75</sup> It is possible that both the high rates of peer victimization and the school policies that, intentionally or unintentionally, target LGBTQ students may put these students at risk of greater contact with school authorities and increase their likelihood of facing disciplinary sanctions.

**Rates of school discipline.** We asked LGBTQ students if they had certain types of experiences at school as a result of disciplinary action. A third of students in this survey (33.0%) reported having ever been disciplined at school, with most of these students reporting discipline that occurred in-school, such as being sent to principal’s office, receiving detention, or receiving in-school suspension (see Figure 1.28). A smaller portion of LGBTQ students reported experiencing disciplinary consequences that prohibited them from attending school, such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion (see also Figure 1.28). In addition, disciplinary action in school can lead to having contact with the criminal or juvenile justice system, such as being arrested or serving time in a detention facility. A very small portion of LGBTQ students (1.2%) reported having had contact with the criminal or juvenile justice system. It is important to note that we asked students

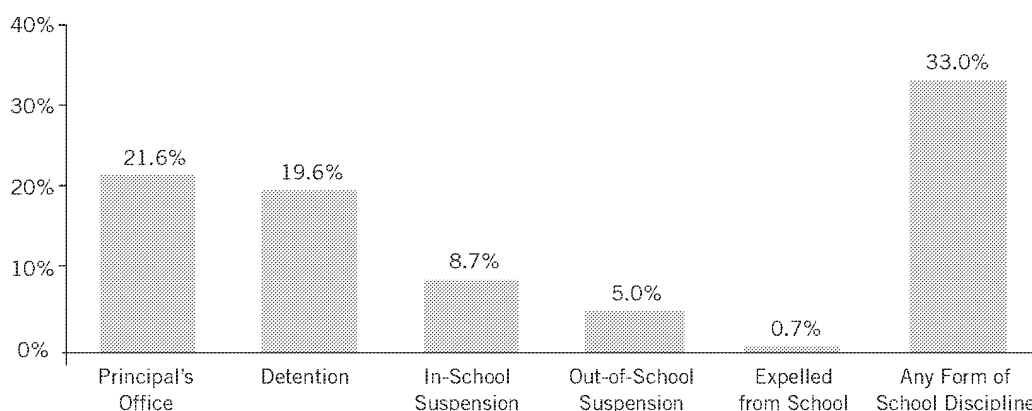
specifically about justice system involvement as a result of school discipline, and thus the finding does not reflect student involvement in criminal or juvenile justice system in general.

LGBTQ youths’ high rates of victimization, and discriminatory policies that intentionally or unintentionally target LGBTQ students, may put them in greater contact with school authorities and increase their risk of discipline. For these reasons, we examined whether students who experienced victimization and discrimination experienced higher rates of school discipline.

**Discipline due to punitive response to harassment and assault.** As discussed in the “Reporting of School-Based Harassment and Assault” section, some LGBTQ students reported that they themselves were disciplined when they reported being victimized to school staff. As a result, LGBTQ students who experience higher rates of victimization may also experience higher rates of school discipline, perhaps because they were perceived to be the perpetrator in these incidents. Indeed, LGBTQ youth who reported higher than average levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender expression experienced substantially greater rates of discipline examined in this survey.<sup>76</sup> For example, as shown in Figure 1.29, 47.0% of students with higher levels of victimization based on sexual orientation experienced school discipline compared to 26.7% of students with lower levels of this type of victimization.

**Absenteeism.** LGBTQ students who are victimized at school may also miss school because they

**Figure 1.28 Percentage of LGBTQ Students Who Have Experienced School Discipline**





feel unsafe, and thus, face potential disciplinary consequences for truancy. We found that students who reported missing school due to safety concerns were more likely to have experienced school discipline.<sup>77</sup> Specifically, 44.3% of students who had missed at least a day of school in past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable had faced some sort of disciplinary action, compared to 27.4% of students who had not missed school for these reasons.

**Discipline due to discriminatory policies and practices.** As discussed in the “Experiences of Discrimination” section of this report, some schools have official policies or unofficial practices that unfairly target LGBTQ youth, and also put LGBTQ youth at greater risk for school discipline. For example, having a gendered dress code may result in a transgender or nonbinary student being disciplined because they are wearing clothing deemed “inappropriate” based on their legal sex. Furthermore, as also indicated in that earlier section, a number of students in our survey reported that they were subjected to punishment for violations that were not similarly punished among their non-LGBTQ peers (e.g., same-sex couples experiencing harsher discipline for public displays of affection in schools than heterosexual couples). When we examined the relationship between discrimination and discipline, we found that LGBTQ students who had experienced discriminatory policies and practices at school had reported higher rates of school discipline — 40.2% of LGBTQ youth experiencing discrimination at

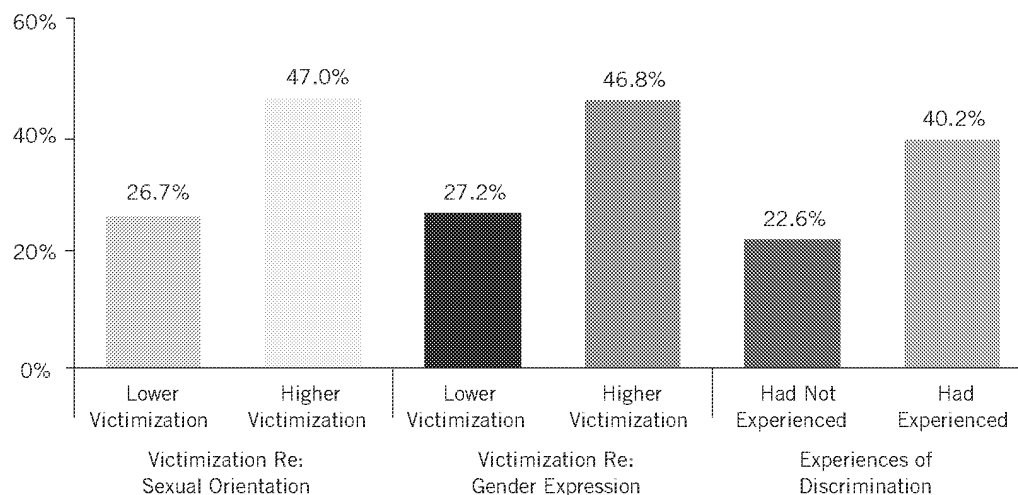
school had experienced some form of disciplinary action, compared to 22.6% of youth who had not experienced discrimination (see Figure 1.29).<sup>78</sup>

These findings evidence that a sizeable number of LGBTQ students experienced school discipline, and that unsafe and unfair school environments, including experiences with victimization and discriminatory school policies and practices, contribute to higher rates of school discipline. In order to reduce disciplinary disparities toward LGBTQ students, schools need to employ non-punitive discipline practices and the creation of safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ students, with properly trained school personnel. Educators need to be provided professional development trainings on issues specifically related to LGBTQ student and bias-based bullying and harassment, so that they can effectively intervene in cases of bullying of LGBTQ students. In addition, schools need to eliminate school policies and practices that discriminate against LGBTQ students.

### *School Climate and School Belonging*

The degree to which students feel accepted by and a part of their school community is another important indicator of school climate and is related to a number of educational outcomes, including greater academic motivation and effort and higher academic achievement.<sup>79</sup> Students who experience victimization or discrimination at school may feel excluded and disconnected from their school community. Thus, we examined the relationship

**Figure 1.29 School Discipline by Experiences of Victimization and Discrimination**  
(Percentage of LGBTQ Students Who Experienced School Discipline)



**“Most students use homophobic, racist, and transphobic slurs. One gay student has been beaten. I feel like I do not belong here.”**

between these negative indicators of school climate and LGBTQ students’ sense of belonging to their school community.<sup>80</sup>

As illustrated in Figure 1.30, students who experienced a higher severity of victimization based on sexual orientation or gender expression reported lower levels of school belonging than students who experienced less severe victimization in school.<sup>81</sup> For example, nearly two-thirds of students who experienced lower levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation (62.7%) reported a positive sense of connection to their school, compared to less than a third of students who experienced more severe victimization (28.7%).

Experiencing anti-LGBTQ discriminatory policies and practices at school was also related to decreased feelings of connectedness to the school community. As also illustrated in Figure 1.30, LGBTQ students who did not experience school-based discrimination were more likely to report

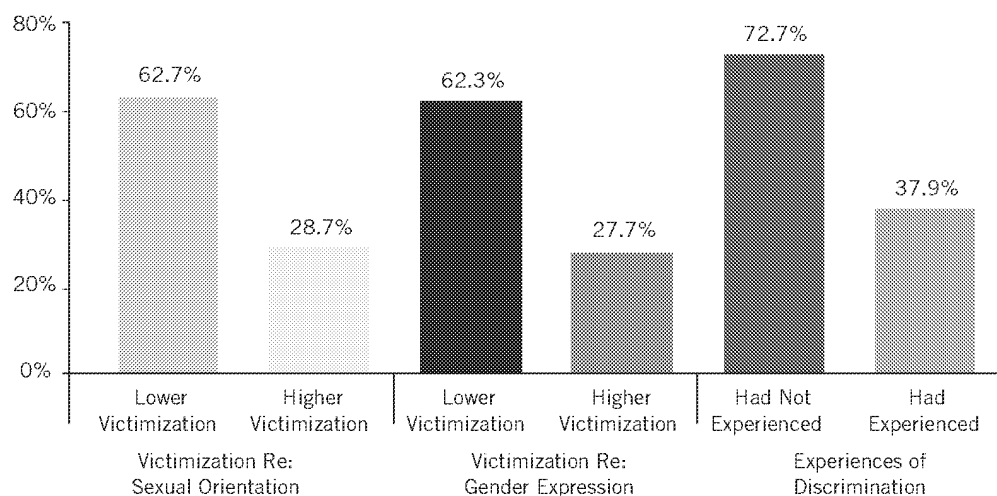
positive feelings of school belonging compared to students who had experienced school-based discrimination (72.7% vs. 37.9%).<sup>82</sup>

### ***School Climate and Psychological Well-Being***

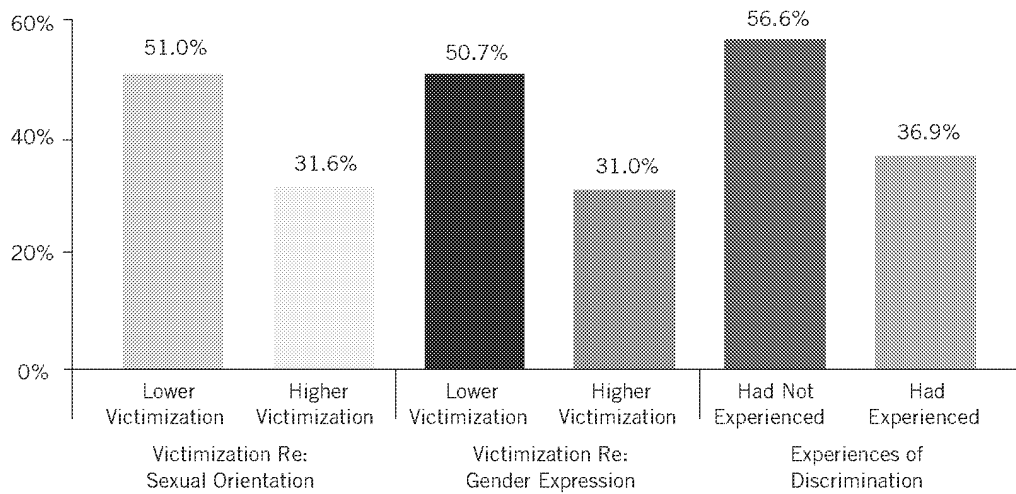
Previous research has shown that being harassed or assaulted at school may have a negative impact on students’ mental health and self-esteem.<sup>83</sup> Given that LGBTQ students face an increased likelihood for experiencing harassment and assault in school,<sup>84</sup> it is especially important to examine how these experiences relate to their well-being. We specifically examined two aspects of psychological well-being: self-esteem<sup>85</sup> and depression<sup>86</sup>. As illustrated in Figures 1.31 and 1.32, LGBTQ students who reported more severe victimization regarding their sexual orientation or gender expression had lower levels of self-esteem<sup>87</sup> and higher levels of depression<sup>88</sup> than those who reported less severe victimization. For example, 72.0% of students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on sexual orientation demonstrated higher levels of depression compared to 42.3% of students who experienced lower levels of victimization (see Figure 1.32).

Discrimination and stigma have also been found to adversely affect the well-being of LGBTQ people.<sup>89</sup> We found that LGBTQ students in our survey who reported experiencing discriminatory policies or practices in school had lower levels of self-esteem<sup>90</sup> and higher levels of depression<sup>91</sup> than students who did not report experiencing this

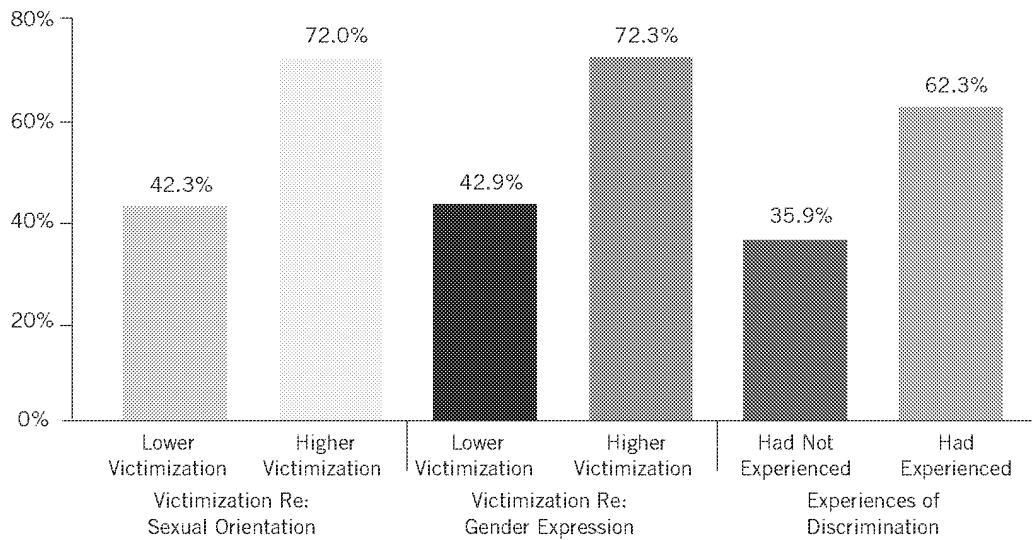
**Figure 1.30 School Belonging by Experiences of Victimization and Discrimination**  
(Percentage of LGBTQ Students Demonstrating Positive School Belonging)



**Figure 1.31 Self-Esteem by Experiences of Victimization and Discrimination**  
 (Percentage of LGBTQ Students Demonstrating Higher Levels of Self-Esteem)



**Figure 1.32 Depression by Experiences of Victimization and Discrimination**  
 (Percentages of LGBTQ Students Demonstrating Higher Levels of Depression)





discrimination (see Figures 1.31 and 1.32). For example, as shown in Figure 1.31, only 36.9% of students who experienced discrimination demonstrated higher levels of self-esteem compared to 56.6% of students who had not experienced discrimination.

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### ***Conclusions***

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The findings in this section provide insight into how peer victimization and institutional discrimination may lead to less welcoming schools and more negative educational outcomes for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students who experienced victimization and discrimination were more likely to have lower educational aspirations, lower grades, and higher absenteeism. They were also

more likely to experience school discipline, which could result in pushing students out of school, and even into the criminal justice system.<sup>92</sup> These findings also demonstrate that a hostile school climate may negatively impact an LGBTQ student's sense of school belonging and psychological well-being. In order to ensure that LGBTQ students are afforded supportive learning environments and equal educational opportunities, community and school advocates must work to prevent and respond to in-school victimization and to eliminate school policies and practices that discriminate against LGBTQ youth. Reducing victimization and discrimination in school may then lead to better mental health for LGBTQ youth, better enabling them to reach their fullest potential inside and outside of school.





# **PART TWO: SCHOOL-BASED RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS**

Student organizers gather at the 2012 Students of Color Organizing Conference, held by the GLSEN Baltimore chapter to help train LGBTQ and ally youth to work toward creating safer schools for LGBTQ students of color.



